

What's so Funny?: Families in the Comics

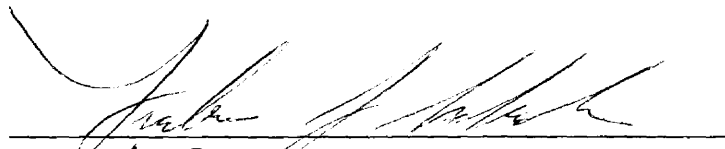
by

Mary Hughes

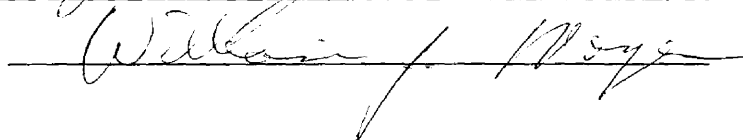
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First Reader

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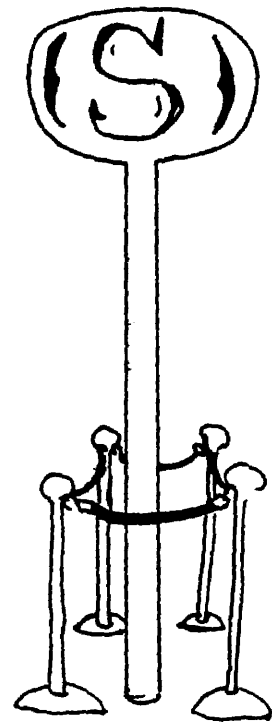
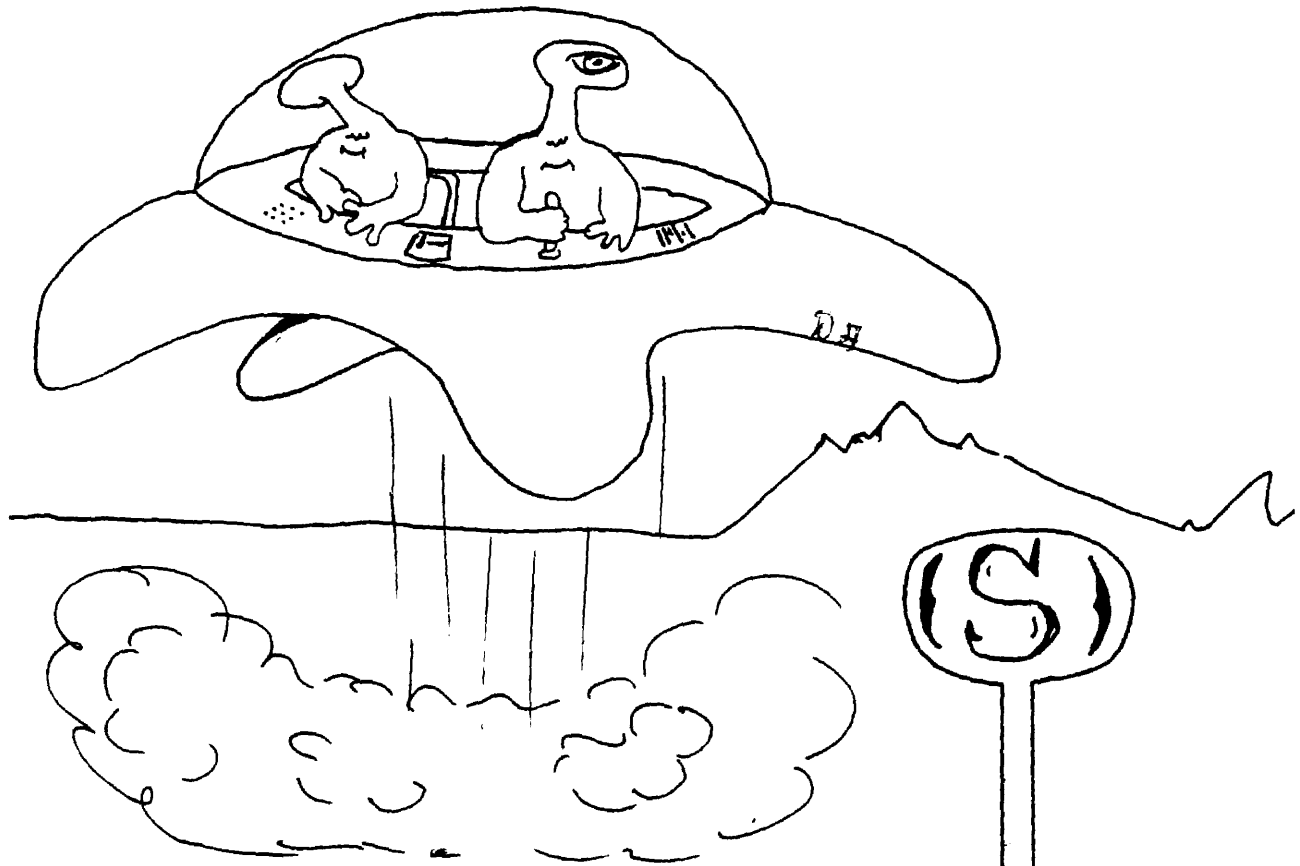
Second Reader

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What's so Funny?: Families in the Comics

by

Mary Hughes



What's so Funny?: Families in the Comics

Picture this: A small spacecraft lands at the South Pole. Two relatively innocuous-looking individuals emerge, note pads in hand, ready to make their observations of life on Planet Earth. The penguins are cooperative, insofar as they are able, but the simplicity of their lives leaves the visitors unsatisfied. The spaceship is transmogrified into a twin-engine Cessna (with solar propulsion, of course) and the duo flies due north, smack into Middle America, USA. In Middle America, the pair begin serious investigation into the life and habits of the modern American family. They watch television, read newspapers, go to movies, mingle with the natives, and ask innocuous questions about mating habits. And through it all they strive with Herculean effort to leave their cultural baggage checked so as neither to contaminate nor compromise their work.

In a sense, any investigation of American culture by a born and bred American is somewhat akin to what our hypothetical duo will be confronting, only worse. Someone who is not "from here" brings cultural baggage that has to be checked at the gate if observations are even to approach scientific detachment. Someone who is from here has the more difficult task of managing that scientific detachment while investigating artifacts of the same cultural baggage he or she checked on the way in.

Consider eye contact, for example. American children are trained to understand that respect for their elders includes looking them in the eye during conversation. That same behavior is considered rude and disrespectful in Japan, where people are trained to keep their eyes lowered in the presence of their elders or their betters. However, it would be a mistake to assume that all eye contact in America is done out of respect simply because the norm here is to make eye contact. It would be equally inappropriate to attribute lack of eye contact to a lack of courtesy or to a Japanese upbringing.

In order to understand a given instance of eye contact, it is necessary to understand the norms regarding eye contact. Then the investigator must understand the circumstances of the particular eye contact incident: Was one party or another unfamiliar with American norms? Was one party terribly shy about eye contact? Was fear or anger involved in the incident, making eye contact uncomfortable? Did physical proximity make eye contact difficult? Or was there anything else interfering with behaving according to the norm? Only when these things are determined can the eye contact incident be evaluated and understood in light of the existing norms.

The greatest risk one faces in evaluating familiar phenomena is failing to evaluate them. They seem so familiar as to preclude the need for evaluation. The next

greatest difficulty is trying to evaluate them objectively. When a familiar behavior is exhibited, the tendency is to dismiss it as unimportant because it is already understood by the observer. Looking at one's own culture demands acquiring a degree of distance from the subject. The investigator must approach the subject from the outside and work her way in rather than examine it from the inside out.

In anthropological terms:

A nonethnocentric relativist position must also be applied when doing intracultural studies (e.g., of the contemporary United States). Even if the analyst is a native of the culture under investigation, he or she must continue to work with an emic/etic perspective during the analysis of cultural parts. (Tosuner-Fikes 12)

Emic, actor-oriented, observation is what most people do most of the time. Individuals are not only observers of their own culture, but are bearers of it as well. They are suspended in a matrix of behaviors which they treat as normal, and they tend to question or to react to behaviors only when behaviors fall outside acceptable normal limits.

Etic, observer-oriented, observation is the sort done by an outsider who comes to see what a particular culture is all about. Our guests in the Cessna won't know what the behavioral norms are until they have made sufficient observations to establish the patterns that "come naturally" to

the natives. Whether their conclusions will be correct will depend upon the accuracy of their observations and the degree to which they refrain from judging this culture in terms of their own. It is this judgment "in terms of" that makes self-investigation especially difficult. It is all too easy to ignore something that seems self-evident or to attempt to justify or explain rather than report on behaviors one knows from the inside out.

Judging what is observed in terms of what is already known can lead to circular reasoning and inaccurate conclusions. Although leaving cultural baggage behind may be a virtually insurmountable task, and admitting that complete dissociation is not probable, a degree of distancing is possible. It is this distance that the native investigator must bring to the study of her or his own culture. Without it, self-study becomes a narcissistic exercise unlikely to yield anything more than a, quite possibly distorted, reflection.

Comic strips are among those cultural artifacts most commonly taken purely at face value, usually ingested whole and without question. Canady, in the foreword to The Smithsonian Collection of Newspaper Comics, says "The comics are ubiquitous. You don't have to follow a strip for its identity to have somehow entered your consciousness: the comics affect your way of feeling about the daily world whether or not you read them" (8). This seems a rather bold statement

until one considers how prevalent comics and comic strip characters are. For example, virtually everyone in the country knows Snoopy and his bird friend Woodstock. It isn't necessary to read Peanuts to know that Snoopy, a dog, has more common sense than most people. Why else would Metropolitan Life Insurance use him to sell insurance?

Here is a case of a cultural artifact with tremendous power but which has been all but ignored by students of culture until fairly recently. This may be because:

There is an elitist bias to most of our academic work. We are so intoxicated with the greatest that has been thought and said that we forget about the common man. We also assume that the culture of the common man is insignificant and deny ourselves a perspective on life that might act as some kind of corrective to the distortions we get by limiting ourselves to a view from on high. (Berger, Stripped 2)

Cultural artifacts that emanate from the masses won't go away if they are ignored. But they might provide useful clues that will aid our understanding of how we are developing as a culture.

We live in a mass media society wherein the majority of the messages are aimed at the mythical average person. Given the power media have to influence Mr. and Mrs. Average and their children, all popular media, including comic

strips, deserve careful study. What messages do the media send and what do those messages say about us as a culture?

"Any phenomenon which plays so heavily on the sensibility of the American populace deserves study purely for sociological reasons if for no other. The comics serve as revealing reflectors of popular attitudes, tastes, and mores" (Inge xi). If Inge is correct, and it would seem that he is, there is every reason to believe that the family comic strip is a reasonable indicator of attitudes and values regarding family life in America. At the same time, there are theories, research, and analyses emanating from the academic/social science realm indicating that behaviors in America are decidedly not in line with expressed values.

Are the writers of family comic strips just out of touch with reality? Are the readers of these strips simply trying to escape reality? Are the social scientists generalizing too much from their experiences in dealing with families in crisis? Or is it just possible that what Americans really believe about families is a combination of ingredients taken from the real lives they live mixed with a little humor and hope from, among other things, the comics?

Clifford Geertz, in The Interpretation of Cultures, discusses cultural description at length. He makes a distinction between "thin" and "thick" analysis, defining the first as what is actually observed and the second as what is meant by what is observed.

The concept of culture I espouse . . . is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. (5-6)

The examination of family comic strips is not proposed as a base wide enough for an ethnography on the American family. But interpretation of the "thick" level of meaning in a cultural artifact like family comic strips can only help improve understanding of what Americans mean when they say "family."

Interpretation of thick meanings goes beyond the apparent message to what is actually meant. Eye contact, as already discussed, has meanings defined by the social context of the actors; but there is more to eye contact than courtesy or lack thereof. In a classroom setting, students are expected to look at their teachers when the teachers are lecturing or asking questions. A student who fails to look at the teacher may be sending any number of messages: I am shy; I am unprepared for class and I don't want you to call on me; I am bored; I am thinking about something else; I hate this class and I want it to be over with.

No observer, however talented, can read the deeper meaning of no eye contact just by watching the incident.

However, if the incident is placed in the context of similar incidents and is then related to other observed behaviors, it is possible to get to the real meaning of the eye contact incident. The best friend who knows that the student is worried about problems at home will probably understand the lack of eye contact better than the teacher.

All cultural artifacts—from behaviors like eye contact to constructs like television sitcoms—have apparent meanings as well as deeper meanings rooted in the socio-cultural milieu that produced the artifacts. These deeper meanings are accessible when the artifacts are examined within their physical, historical, and social contexts. Popular media, especially, need to be placed in context if more than surface meanings are to be understood. Comic strips, sitcoms, soap operas, television miniseries, in fact, all entertainment media, have readily discernible surface messages because they employ the common language of the masses. More subtle analysis, however, demands getting past the entertainment factor and evaluating the elements that make up the message.

Media analysis provides one approach to getting past the entertainment aspect of the funnies to the attitudes and beliefs that inform the medium and its artists. And it is this digging that is one of the most difficult aspects of any analysis of popular media, since all popular media are intended as entertainment. One of the cultural norms about

entertainment is that the audience should become involved with the medium, ideally to such an extent that the characters attain a measure of reality for the audience. The funnies are no different except that, regardless of how real comic strip characters seem, they are also meant to be funny. It is all too easy to enjoy the humor and forget the investigation. Media analysis to the rescue.

Berger's book Media Analysis Techniques is helpful because it describes a means of investigating media in terms of the actual signs and symbols used to create messages. Semiotics (the basis of media analysis) breaks down communication episodes into component parts. While the whole message may be received and understood as an entity in itself, the components used to create the message can also be considered as individual cultural artifacts. "The manifest structure involves what happens, and the latent structure involves what a text is about. Or, to put it another way, we are not so much concerned with what characters do as we are with what they mean when we use the paradigmatic approach" (19).

This paradigmatic approach to analysis, whether of a medium or an entire culture, rests on the idea that "concepts have meaning because of relations and the basic relationship is oppositional" (Berger, Media 6-7). Essentially, meanings can be understood because of the relations among signs, not from the content or form of the signs. The

relations include both the internal components of the signs in question and the wider cultural context which gives meaning to the signs. From the culture, the receivers of signs learn the oppositions necessary for comprehension; beauty is understood in opposition to ugliness; love opposes hate; happiness opposes sorrow, and so on. The signs, which are things "that can be used to stand for something else," are used in various combinations to create messages, or texts (Berger, Signs 19). "In semiological analysis we make an arbitrary separation of content and form and focus our attention on the system of signs that makes up a text" (Berger, Media 6). It is this concept of "text" that makes media analysis possible.

Texts imply internal languages that make the texts meaningful. "Language is a social institution that tells us how words are to be used; speaking is an individual act based on language" (Berger, Media 12). In the world of the funnies, the texts are a combination of words and pictures, sometimes in color, that speak in their own particular language to audiences who have learned the appropriate sign systems. "Comics communicate in a 'language' that relies on a visual experience common to both creator and audience" (Eisner, Comics 7).

One typical text element in the funnies is the motion line. When a character is supposed to be shown moving rapidly through space, lines drawn behind the character and

usually attached to the character's body indicate that movement—the more frenetic or faster the movement, the greater the number of lines. Sometimes a cloud of dust will be added to increase the intensity of the movement. Another convention is the speech balloon which serves the practical purpose of indicating which character is speaking which lines. Dialogue can increase the precision of the artist's message by commenting on the action; it can also move the story line when a pure visual is inadequate to the task.

Other text elements include the frames used to delineate acts or scenes within a strip, the body stance (body language) of the characters, the spatial orientation of characters within the frames, the physical size of the characters, and the physical appearance of the characters. These are the most basic elements used in comic strips texts, the ones that have developed over time and become the stock in trade of the funny pages.

According to Will Eisner, "Comprehension of an image requires a commonality of experience. This demands of the sequential artist an understanding of the reader's life experience if his message is to be understood. An interaction has to develop because the artist is evoking images stored in the minds of both parties" (Comics 13). The wider cultural context provides the basic images that underlie the communication that takes place in the funnies. While each comic strip artist uses those elements in a highly personal-

ized manner to produce a particular comic strip, the basic images are common to both artist and audience.

Comic strips contain within themselves variations on and extensions of commonly understood images. Thus, each strip has its own 'corporate' identity in the midst of a multiplicity of strips using essentially the same artistic conventions. Garfield is readily recognized by his ears alone; Dagwood's sandwich and hairdo are uniquely his; Snoopy's profile atop his dog house needs only an outline to place him in Peanuts territory. Analysis of comic strips, then, involves examining not only their language but their several dialects.

A comic strip as a whole is considered a bit of humor or part of a continuing story. In media analysis each of the parts of the strip is considered independently. The visual depictions of the characters tell the reader as much about the characters as do their words. Characters' dress and actions contribute to reader understanding. Spatial arrangement within the frames of a comic strip add another facet to the composite message of a comic strip. Color in Sunday editions adds another piece to the communication jigsaw puzzle. In the apparently simple, sometimes depicted as simple-minded, world of the funnies, meaning is not a simple exchange of information but a multi-leveled cultural artifact. "Examine the comics in any daily newspaper and each will be found to support some commonly accepted notion

or standard of society" (Inge xiii). Not only are there norms in the funnies, the norms are expressed via the peculiar grammar of the comic strip.

One other point that Berger makes is that content analysis works best when it is used either in an historical or a comparative manner. Historical analysis shows the development of trends within a culture; comparative analysis illustrates differences in values and beliefs between cultures (Media 94). Both can be used to advantage in an investigation of family comic strips. Tracing historical development will show trends within the medium as well as the effects of related developments such as technology and, sometimes, social changes. It is also likely that intra-cultural comparison between different eras examined within a single culture will yield some useful information.

Both historical and intra-cultural comparisons will be made of each of the strips. Strips will be more comprehensible if they are placed in historical context because comic strips are a reflective medium. Historical context will establish what the strips are reflecting. All the strips have been printed contemporaneously with at least one other strip, making intra-cultural comparison possible as well.

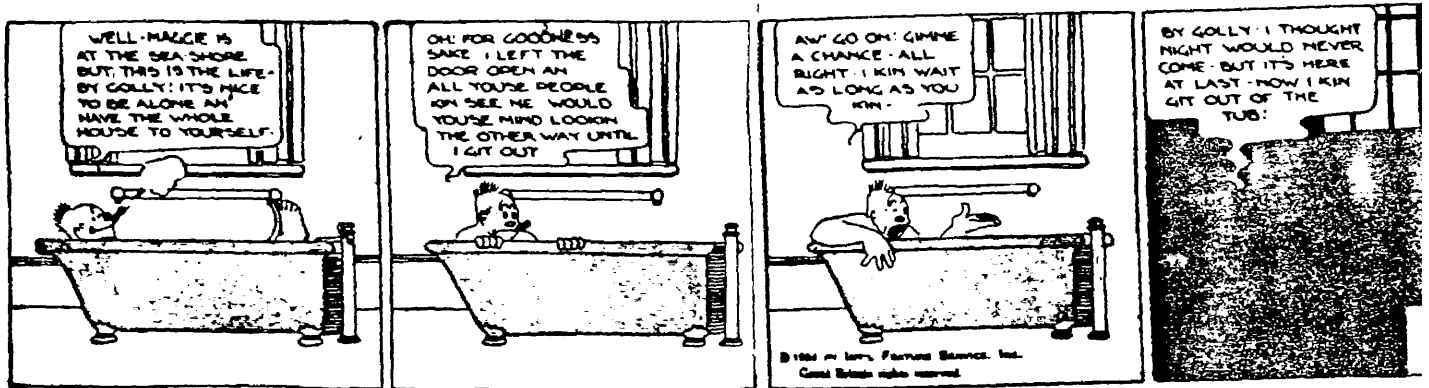
Family comic strips are the primary source of information because, "it has been the homely, lifelike stories of families which have formed the mainstream of the successful art of comic strips" (White and Abel 11). Even strips

without a specific family orientation often make reference to or draw on various aspects of family, e.g., Cathy and her regular run-ins with her parents. Some strips will be examined in collections that have been published in book form. Those unavailable in books will be reviewed on microfilm copies of newspapers that ran the strips selected for the study.

Investigation of the strips involves identification of the various text elements that are used. While each strip has its own textual identity, all of them share certain characteristics that make them family comic strips as opposed to, say, adventure strips or fantasy strips. The text elements, or grammars of these strips, are the elements that carry Geertz's "thick" description.

The value of examining these comic grammars "is that the most important messages we find in comics are seldom consciously placed there by their creators. . . . One reason the comics are so useful to the analyst is that they are so innocent and so devoid of self-consciousness. In the comics we do not find the 'rehearsed response'" (Berger, Signs 53). This is not to say that comic strips exist in a comic strip utopia without reference to their audience. Little Nemo regularly appealed, visually, to the audience for comfort when his parents didn't come to his aid after an especially unsettling dream. Garfield is also fond of crossing the line between fantasy and reality, often ad-

dressing readers directly. The point is that comic strips are, above all, internally consistent and their internal reality takes precedence over real life.



Even when readers are invited in, they are invited into the fantasy, not an extension of everyday life. While never unconscious of audience, the comic strip artist is more conscious of behaviors that would be typical of his or her comic strip characters. Because characters' actions are dictated by the constraints of the comic strip, they remain unrehearsed in the sense that, as a rule, they are not directly and intentionally responding to the audience. (Even when characters from one strip drop in on another strip, they are dropping in within the confines of the funnies.) Freed from direct audience interaction, artists can more readily speak their minds through their creations.

What seems to emerge from the family funnies are fairly basic attitudes and beliefs about family. In some cases, the messages that emerge are intentional. For example, Chic Young put Blondie and Dagwood in "an inexpensive suburb" because he said he was "catering to the average American family" (Sheridan 97). But of even greater interest to the analyst are the implications of defining the average American family in terms of suburbia.

The strips used for this analysis are Bringing Up Father, Blondie, Hi and Lois, and For Better or For Worse. Bringing Up Father is one of the earliest of the family comic strips and one of the most successful. It ran from 1913 to 1954, covering everything from the Gaslight Era to post-World War II America.

Despite the rather unlikely scenario of winning the Irish Sweepstakes that set the stage for the strip, Bringing Up Father still managed to epitomize the family strip in its early incarnation. It contained virtually every element contained in other family strips of the era, from the battle of the sexes to control of the purse strings. It also presented the Industrial Revolution in a positive light, placing its characters in the city in a nice house in a nice neighborhood; and middle class goals included achieving these things out of the prosperity promised by industrialization. The fact that the norms of middle class family

life were exaggerated only served to make the norms more obvious while the exaggerations made for humor.

Blondie was introduced in 1930 and became a family strip in 1933, when Mr. Bumstead relented and allowed Dagwood to marry Blondie rather than starve to death on a hunger strike for love. Chic Young's formula for Blondie was to focus on what he considered the four basic aspects of family life, at least from Dagwood's perspective. These were eating, sleeping, making a living, and raising a family (Young and Marschall 29). Every episode was meant to appeal to the average person, and, given the popularity of the strip and its worldwide distribution, Young achieved his goal.

Since Bringing Up Father and Blondie ran concurrently as family strips, often in the same newspapers, for twenty-one years, they offer two perspectives on family which were, apparently, readily accepted by the public. "The people who create the funnies aim for public favor and do not concern themselves with art before pleasure" (White and Abel 17). Blondie and Bringing Up Father were created by men who were, indeed, more concerned with fun than artistic finesse. The public, by way of the marketplace, mandated their success.

Hi and Lois was selected as the third representative family strip. It has been published continuously since 1954, the year Bringing Up Father's creator George McManus died, and two years before the it left the funny pages

permanently. Blondie and Hi and Lois have run concurrently, usually in the same newspapers, for thirty-eight years. Promotional ads for Hi and Lois touted Lois as the cutest little homemaker since Blondie, an obvious appeal to an established audience. Hi and Lois also epitomized the post World War II experience of moving to the suburbs and pursuing the American dream of private home ownership in a real neighborhood where it was safe and healthy to raise children. By the mid-1950's the baby boom was well on its way; and Chip, Dot, Ditto, and Trixie offered every almost permutation of the American child acceptable in print.

Both Blondie and Hi and Lois have been continued by the sons of their original creators. (McManus had no son to carry on for him, and the attempts made by his surviving colleagues to maintain the Jiggs household failed.)

Blondie and Hi and Lois again provide two different perspectives on family, one that originated before World War II and the other that began during the post-war baby boom years. Both are suburban, self-consciously middle class, purposefully all-American, and, intentionally, typical.

For Better or For Worse is the fourth featured family strip. This strip has been running since 1979, sharing thirteen years with Hi and Lois and Blondie. Although it is written by a Canadian citizen, its family is readily identified as an all-American, modern-style grouping. They are a middle class, two-income family; the kids behave like typi-

cal pre-teens and teenagers; even their clothing is in keeping with the more casual atmosphere associated with the modern family. As with Hi and Lois, the children in the family are very much active cast members, which was less often the case in Bringing Up Father and Blondie. For Better or For Worse continues the small town/suburban orientation of Blondie and Hi and Lois, and it addresses the same everyday situations treated in the latter strips. It is also the only family strip done by a woman, offering humor from a woman's point of view.

Although these strips are the basis for the analysis to follow, they will not be the only strips considered. Just as the wider cultural milieu which produces the funnies must be considered, so must the other funnies in the comic strip milieu be considered, insofar as they enhance the understanding of the family strips. Especially in the 1980's and 90's, some of these other strips provide insights into changing perceptions of family that are not so readily evident in the family strips themselves. Many of these newer strips present alternate family styles that are more like the configurations the census describes than the culturally accepted norm of the nuclear family. Alternate family styles have been depicted throughout the history of the funny pages, but only recently have these alternate forms of family been seen as potentially normal, as in Cathy, whose single career woman is doing what any single

career woman would do—living on her own. In her day, Brenda Starr was glamorous but just a little outré, living as she did on her own resources. In Brenda's day, really nice girls got married and had families.

What the funnies say about families will be compared and contrasted with what social scientists say about families. Since social science usually reports on trends that develop over time, discussing an era such as the Industrial Revolution or a particular decade or perhaps a generational cohort, it seems reasonable to investigate attitudes on family by particular time periods. Breaking the investigation into time-specific groupings will aid in the identification of particular factors or attitudes associated with particular periods of time.

The initial time frame is 1910 to 1930. By 1910 the funnies were a well-established entertainment medium, and syndication meant that people in all parts of the country were being exposed to the same comic strips on a daily basis. The next period runs from 1945 to 1960, the last from 1970 to 1990.

In addition to being the time when the funnies were first established, the two decades between 1910 and 1930 were relatively stable in America. The same is true of the period between 1945 and 1960 as well as the period between 1970 and 1990. Disruptions such as the Depression, World War II, and Civil Rights agitation tend to draw social

science resources away from family investigation and into larger social problems. These disruptions also tend to reinforce cultural attitudes established during less trying times because it is easier for people to cope with problems when they can call upon a set of stable norms. When the stress is eliminated, the effects of the stress often become more apparent, probably because attention is shifted away from the stress and back to the people.

Social science is always interested in things like how the Industrial Revolution or the Depression affect social structures like the family. The funnies, "incorporating within their four or five panels a common strain of the beliefs, desires, and needs of the American public," can also be expected to depict some of these effects (White and Abel 23). Therefore, the most promising course for this stage of investigation into American attitudes on family seems to be that of looking at the relatively stable times. Effects of unsettling influences such as labor unrest or Depression or world war are more likely to stick out when the influence itself is out of the way.

Our investigators in their Cessna have no option but time travel at this point, back to the days of yesteryear and yellow journalism.

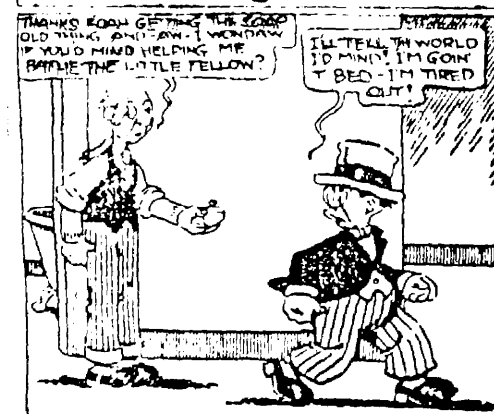
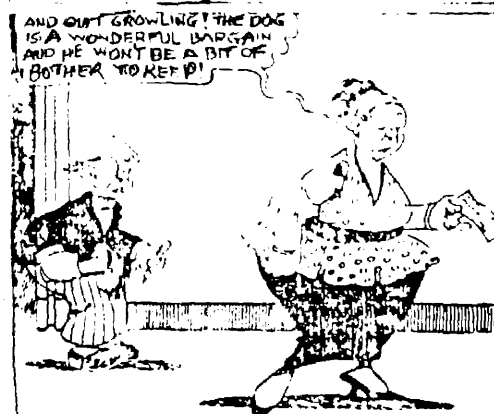
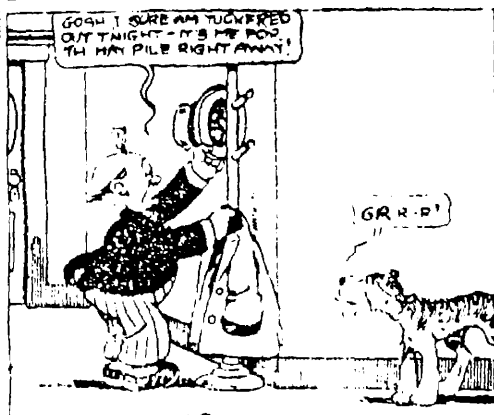
Yellow Journalism and Social Comment

Yellow journalism got its name, originally, from a cartoon character named the Yellow Kid. The Kid was the trenchant predecessor to Bloom County and Doonesbury, and, while an investigation of the Kid and his progeny would be most instructive, it is beyond the scope of this paper. Still, it is noteworthy that even at the turn of the century, when comics were only a few years old, they were already impinging on the collective unconscious of the American public, lending their names to such social phenomena as sensationalized, biased newspaper reporting.

A number of family comic strips ran between 1910 and the 1913 advent of the family Jiggs in Bringing Up Father; and several of them continued in syndication as part of the funny pages neighborhood Jiggs and company inhabited. The strips all had several features in common. The humor was vaudevillian in nature, relying on the same sorts of slapstick routines that were common to the popular theater and music hall. The humor situations revolved around typical household concerns like managing (or not!) money, simple household maintenance, entertaining guests, jealousy, and relations with members of the extended family. One notable example of the last variety was a strip entitled Pa's Son-in-Law which had Pa, in his own house, playing second fiddle to his son-in-law.

PA'S SON-IN-LAW

By Wellington



Comic strip wives were almost always larger or fatter or stronger than their husbands. The physical disparity in size contributed to the visual nature of much of the humor, since it was generally clear that, in any real combat, the Mrs. would prevail. For the most part, all family members were depicted in caricature, except when the person in question was a young (read "desirable" or "attractive") female. These were the only characters consistently drawn in a fairly realistic manner. One example is Petey whose niece, Mabel, lives with the family. Mabel is young and attractive and her cartoon character looks more like a fashion magazine sketch than a funny pages female.

PETEY—HE SLIPS ONE OVER

By C. A. VOY.



Many of the strips that depicted the trials of running the middle class household of gaslight days included in their cast of characters a young and attractive housemaid. These housemaids looked more like fashion plates than domes-

tic help and often were responsible for the hot water reserved for the Mr. of the house. Old Man Grump couldn't be bothered to assist with women's work, until he realized that the woman in need of assistance was actually the lovely young maid, Gloria. (While class distinctions were carefully maintained, they generally succumbed in the face of beauty.) Attractive women who were not members of the family served the same function they do today in domestic comedies, that of providing the man of the house a bit of fantasy which in turn gave the woman of the house a target for jealousy that the audience could laugh at.

The values apparent in these strips were WASPish and decidedly middle class. Petey always had a ready comment about manners and mores, from the inappropriateness of face

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makeup on women to the "too skimpy" bathing costumes of the day. When Prohibition was in force, the humor sometimes ran on the "dry" side, as when Andy Gump tried to keep away from Min so she wouldn't be able to smell his breath; but he couldn't stop the hiccups. Often, the Mrs. was after the Mr. for infractions of the house rules. This last issue was indicative of the economic basis for much of the humor in these strips, a brand of humor that remains effective even in the liberated 90's. The man's realm is his job, the woman's her home.

This depiction reflects one change wrought by the shift from a family-based, cottage-industry economy to an industrial wage economy. When family members had to leave the household to earn wages, the division of labor that became the basis for identification of the modern nuclear family was born. The man of the family was responsible for providing for his wife and children; the wife was responsible for home management. The spheres of family responsibility and influence were divided, and the struggle to retain supremacy in one's own sphere evolved. In the funnies it often de-veloped into sometimes armed combat on the home front. Once the home became the woman's domain, husbands and other men were free to do exactly what the lady of the house allowed. While the Mr. was usually recognized as the provider, the home belonged, in no uncertain terms, to the woman.

Children were in relatively short supply in many comic strip homes, but those who were present were quite adept at managing their lives. They seldom had much difficulty manipulating their elders, and were just as likely as the wife to get the better of the man of the house. In many ways, children were depicted as short grown-ups rather than young humans, an attitude that pervaded much of the thinking about children at the turn of the century. According to Calhoun, "On the whole it can not be doubted that America has entered upon 'the century of the child'" (131). He went so far as to suggest that children be included in the family decision making process (156).

Children were certainly independent creatures as far as the funnies were concerned, and, in the middle class strips, enfranchised by the family democracy. They contributed ideas, sometimes in conflict with family values, that were learned outside the purview of the family in urban institutions ranging from schools to factories. This internal family conflict was indicative of social conflict around changes in the family as well as in the social fabric. For Calhoun "the country is the ideal home environment as contrasted with the ugliness and vice of cities" (66). This attitude probably accounts for the fact that most families in the funnies lived in pleasant suburban surroundings. They still were forced to deal with changes in family management that were directly attributable to social forces

outside the family's sphere of influence, but they weren't subject to the indignities of life depicted in the Yellow Kid's Hogan's Alley. The average family in the funnies was nothing if not middle class.

Perhaps the subtlest change depicted in the funnies that reflected a shift from a rural to an urban economy was the development of social institutions to meet the needs of individuals within families. Some of these institutions were prescribed for the laboring classes by members of the élite—schools and truant officers most notably. Others developed out of a need or desire for social activities—women's clubs, men's athletic clubs, etc. Often humor was derived from the efforts made by various family members to indulge in their own particular entertainments. Since many of these were exclusive in nature, there was ample opportunity for conflict over who would get to do what.

The funnies were not alone in this caricaturization of the American family between the turn of the century and the early 30's. Radio programs, films, and popular novels all used the themes of individual versus group needs or goals, jealousy, and male versus female versions of what constitutes a good time.

Calhoun, writing in 1919, summarized the consequences for the family of the industrial revolution:

Division of labor and the cessation of the household economic unit has brought socialization;

society lays claim to the child and refuses to recognize the parent's property right; parental protection of the young becomes less and less necessary and less and less possible as social parenthood gradually absorbs the old domestic jurisdiction. The family experiences individuation, ceases to be a forced grouping, and develops toward ethical unity and spontaneous democracy. (158)

This rosy picture (obviously not a Polaroid) has yet to develop, except on the funny pages. Yet the modern nuclear family described here was taken to be the norm, in spite of the mass of evidence that only a small segment of the population was granted the economic luxury to devote time to developing that "ethical unity and spontaneous democracy."

Social scientists who bemoaned the fact that the industry practice of employing whole families succeeded in "nominally keeping the family intact, [while] it abolished the substance—the home," held fast to the primacy of the nuclear norm (Calhoun 67). Arguments in favor of reform centered on maintaining wages at a level that would allow men to support their families on a single income so that women could keep house and care for young children until social institutions such as schools could take over. This division of labor along gender lines was considered normal and appropriate. Where equal opportunities and wages for women were espoused, the reason was usually that cheap female labor depressed

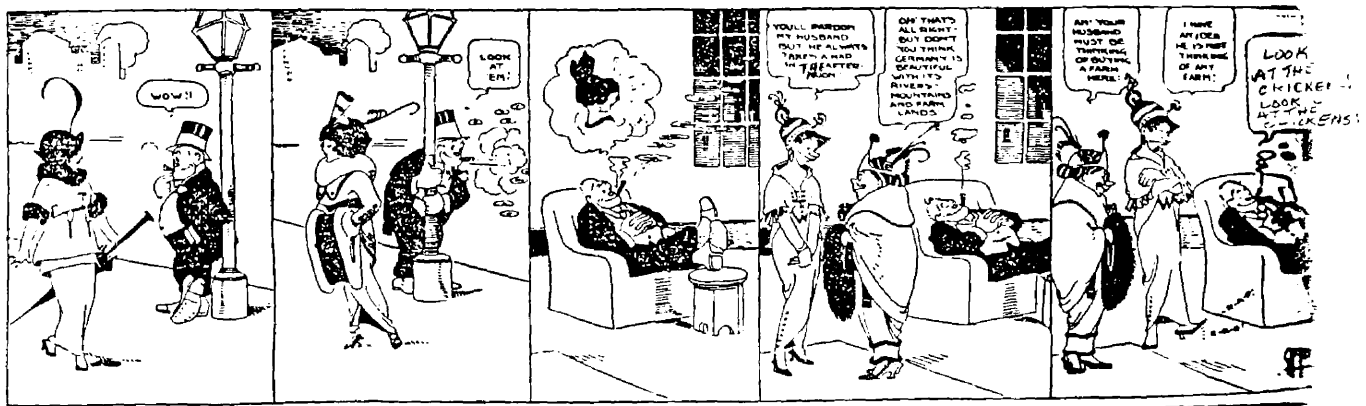
wages for men. Keeping wages higher for women would also keep them higher for men, precluding the need for wives to enter the labor force.

For the most part, the funnies didn't concern themselves with the social forces affecting families. Nonetheless, they were relatively accurate in their portrayal of what was perceived to be the normal American family. Analysis of social or cultural phenomena revolves around the distinctions between quantifiable or at least collectible information versus the perceptions subjects have about the data collected. The investigator must remain aware of the wider cultural context that informs any social phenomenon or risk serious misinterpretation of data.

Social change, in particular, requires placement in time. "Consideration of historical trends, both regional and global, is important. A specific change within a culture must be seen in relation to broader aspects of change" (Tosuner-Fikes 13). Nothing exists in a vacuum, and "the family is in no sense an independent institution capable of being fashioned, sustained, or modified at will to suit the fancy" (Calhoun 323). So, whatever freedom the cartoonist had to interpret family, that interpretation was bounded by the pre-existent social limits or perceptions of what was considered "family."

Two related attitudes round out the family portrait found in the funnies. The first is romance as a basis for

marriage and its almost inevitable concomitant, jealousy. The second is the perception of the family as the most important social, cultural, and moral unit. Most cultures have defined and defended the concept of family. But not all cultures have defined family in the same way. The definition of family that informs these early family comic strips is that of the autonomous nuclear family consisting of husband and wife and their immediate offspring. Whenever any Mr. so much as looked at a young, attractive female (and was caught doing so) the wife was justified in almost any reaction, however extreme, she chose to indulge. Because romance was based on personal attractiveness, it was imperative that the wife be the most attractive person in her husband's life. Any threat to the stability of the couple was a threat to the security of the family, and nothing was acceptable that might disturb the family as the cornerstone of society.



Moving On Up

Enter Maggie and Jiggs, a most unlikely couple to represent American family life for forty-one years. George McManus enjoyed moderate success with several different comic strips, but none was as successful as Bringing Up Father. Maggie began her life in the funnies as a washer-woman and Jiggs as a bricklayer. They were immigrant Irish, definitely laboring class, and they incorporated virtually every stereotypical funny pages family cliché into their not so typical home. Bringing Up Father combined all the elements of the early family comic strips described thus far with the added fillip of champagne money in a strictly beer household.

In his commentary for the collection Jiggs Is Back Blackbeard said, "What usually shapes wide public response to a comic strip— then as now—is its direct relevance to what the public already knows, what it experiences almost daily" (12). At first glance, Maggie and Jiggs seem to have nothing in common with any average family. They start life as laboring class immigrants and then they win the Irish Sweepstakes, instantly rising "out of poverty into the sweet-smelling region of money," but without acquiring the social status money promises (Kennedy 7). Neither of them has to work any longer, and they set up housekeeping in a fashionable neighborhood from which Jiggs is continually

trying to escape in order to spend time with his old friends.

This unlikely scenario is quite in keeping with the American myth that anyone can achieve anything in this land of opportunity, and Berger reminds us that "what is most significant about myths is the stories they tell us, not their style" (Media 20). When story-telling incorporates fantasy elements anyone can identify with, it can achieve relevance for almost any reader, no matter how unlikely the situation may be. When it is entertaining as well, it can make a fortune for the storyteller.

The first seven years of Bringing Up Father fall into a period Berger characterized this way:

The first generation strips tended to be humorous. . . . The very titles of the strips suggest the kind of innocent lightheartedness and playfulness that characterized these strips. . . . The art work in these strips tends to be simple and crude—perhaps as unrealistic as the ideas people supposedly had about the world in the age of innocence. (Comic-Stripped 21)

Certainly, the fantastic scenario that was the basis for Bringing Up Father was born of romanticism and McManus made no pretense of his purpose. He intentionally went for slapstick humor, believing it "the best type for producing a real hearty laugh" (Sheridan 45).

Blackbeard maintains that readers were responding to McManus' version of a comic staple, "the melodrama of unending domestic conflict as brought about by a presumably 'inherent' feminine inclination towards culture in open warfare against a presumably 'inherent' masculine inclination to avoid such concerns" (13). McManus considered the basis of the strip to be "the resistance of the head of the household to his family's social ambitions" (Sheridan 45). As a rule, whether in the funnies or elsewhere, women were depicted as readers of books and men as readers of newspapers. Calhoun further distinguished the roles in marriage along gender lines claiming "marriage is seldom a comradeship of equal minds; woman mothers, man pets" (125).

In the grammar of the family comic strip, these traditional, prescribed, gender-specific roles are among the strongest symbols employed. Humor is regularly derived from the fact that one or another family member has failed to meet a role-defined obligation. Most often the Mr. falls short and becomes the butt of the day's gag, a situation that reinforces the woman's domestic power. The Mrs. gets the horse laugh when the man's "superior" intellect shines through.

Despite the unusual domestic arrangement of the Jiggs household, this battle of the sexes was readily accepted by the reading public. It seems likely, then, "that these comics strike some kind of a chord in their readers' imagi-

nations and aid them in working out their own psychological problems" (Berger, Comic-Stripped 21-22). Humor has long been an anodyne for unpleasant situations. The intensity of post-industrial family life bred as much animosity as it did love and security, a not surprising outcome given the increasingly private nature of the family group in an urban setting. Close relationships, especially in a physically close environment like that experienced by most working class families in urban areas, have always held the potential for problems. With nowhere to go but home, some level of domestic strife was inevitable, and working out domestic difficulties on the funny pages was far and away preferable to confronting them at home. Maggie and Jiggs seem to have served as the collective conscience and whipping boy in the early days.

Several factors worked together to make Maggie and Jiggs useful in their socially cathartic capacity. The established convention of the wife being larger than the husband contributed its share. Originally, Maggie and Jiggs were the same size, but McManus "shrank" Jiggs for comic effect (Harvey 52). The big wife was a perennial threat to the physical well-being of the husband, but there were other social conventions at work as well.

By 1910 the physical and economic requirements of industrialization had transformed the home from a jointly held family territory to the woman's domain with the man

banished to the world of commerce to earn the family livelihood. Having a smaller man in a comic strip was one way to balance the power between the male domain of business and the female domain of home. Money, earned at work, was associated with the male domain and with power. Greater size allowed the woman to carry more weight at home, where she was in charge.

It is unlikely that comic strip artists would have interpreted their own work this way. Yet the conclusion seems inevitable. White and Abel claim that the attributes of family strips "depend far more on the way they enhance the norm than on how closely they follow it" (28). These early strips weren't claiming that the norm in America was for the wife to be larger than her husband but that she was in charge in her area, the home. Visually depicted, her power was in her size.

The Jiggs family were always shown in formal attire, except for Jiggs who regularly eschewed shirt, collar, and shoes, much to Maggie's chagrin. This distinction illustrated the divergence of goals between Maggie and Jiggs. She and their grown daughter Nora wanted to break into society; Jiggs wanted to break out. This goal conflict provided ample opportunity for social commentary on the classes. Kennedy wrote: "It was the specifics of these contrasting worlds [laboring and elite] that made the story of Maggie and Jiggs valuable originally and keeps it valuable today as

peerless social history" (Kennedy 7). McManus had only to report what were accepted as normal class attitudes to write his own bit of social history.

Maggie and Nora's efforts to break into society were thwarted because they were burdened with Jiggs who refused to play social games; he behaved the same way at a ball as he would at a ball game. True to his creator's whims, his more natural approach usually led to his meeting and being accepted by the same upper crust folk Maggie pursued. Time and again, Jiggs and McManus proved to the reading public that simple pleasures and straightforward behavior were the best. When Maggie wanted to impress some visiting nobility with fine cuisine, Jiggs' corned beef and cabbage "carpéd the diem" instead. [Moral: be yourself with grace instead of someone else with delusions.]

Respect for the laboring class was evident from the way Jiggs' loyalty to his old friends was portrayed. No amount of wealth could come between the old hod carrier and his bosom construction gang buddies, even when their backgrounds were less than sterling. Maggie wished only to escape them and her own lower social order past. While the social and moral dilemma of what to do with old friends when one "makes it" is hardly a laughing matter, the situations created by the attempt to be someone or something one is not can be funny. Scenarios on the subject are a commonplace in television situation comedies. What is less amusing is the fact

that the social scheming was portrayed as a part of the woman's domain.

The battle between the sexes was based, in part, on the presumption that the urge to get ahead was the woman's concern. The good woman behind every successful man was back there pushing him to achieve higher status at work, to make more money, to support her in the style to which she wanted to become accustomed. The achievement norm that supposedly motivated men to success was transformed from an inner drive to an outer goad. This was another reaction to the shift from a home-centered to a market-centered economy. The only way a middle class woman could substantially improve her situation was through the efforts of her husband. Success, measured in dollars, meant comfort and security for a woman and her children.

Marriage had already become less a social or community concern and more a contract between individuals with personal goals. Generally, the contract demanded that the man support the family and the woman manage the household. Thus the division of labor was codified as a cultural norm. With contractual obligations taking a more central role in marriage and family life, it is no surprise that, in the funnies, Jiggs became Maggie's burden and she became his. Exaggeration of Jiggs' failure to meet the role defined obligation to get ahead served to highlight the obligation itself, just as exaggeration of Maggie's failure to make a

typical comfortable home for Jiggs highlighted that obligation. Since neither failure threatened the well-being of the family, it was safe for readers to laugh at them both.

This burlesque of middle class values and the conflicts they caused was played out physically in the funnies. Maggie regularly helped Jiggs break vases by throwing them at his head. Of course, Jiggs never struck back, since a man was supposed to protect, not abuse, his wife. It is tempting to read Maggie's physical abuse of Jiggs as an aberration, displayed for comic effect. In fact, it seems more representative of the underlying stresses the middle class lived with from day to day. What the visual battle did was to allow the cartoonist, and therefor the audience, to work through some of the ambivalence a rapid pace of change had introduced into the social fabric.

In the funnies, social and cultural norms were being redefined to fit the reality of modern marriage and family life. This was not a problem for readers because the family retained its central position as the arbiter of social norms, so it didn't look too different from what people expected to see. Maggie and Jiggs were funny because they were fish out of water, just like all the other families trying to cope with the new social forms being superimposed on the old, familiar family.

Most social comment in the strip was confined to the sub rosa variety because McManus' purpose was not to upset

the social apple cart. Generally, social commentary slipped in on the side, as when high society behaved abominably or laborers behaved with class. On occasion, issues were addressed, as when the Jiggs family went to Europe for an extended visit. That trip happened while Prohibition was in effect in the States. Moving the action to Europe allowed Jiggs to indulge his taste for beer and spirits freely and legally, which he did often and always to comic effect. Neither McManus nor Jiggs wanted to take on the federal bureaucracy, let alone the silent majority, so humor by way of absurdity made their points for them.

Maggie and Jiggs had a grown son who made a brief appearance and then dropped from sight completely. Daughter Nora lasted quite a bit longer. She was one of the young and attractive comic strip women portrayed fairly realistically, and her string of suitors occasioned both humor and social comment, usually from Jiggs at Maggie's prompting and usually relating to the appropriateness of Nora's behavior with her young men.

The Jiggs children were obviously not in need of the usual home nurture and care associated with family, since both of them were adults. That Nora stayed around longer than her brother points up the difference in expectations for "girls" and "boys" in the teens and twenties. Middle class men were meant to go off to start their own families; women (read "girls") were meant to be married off to appro-

priate young men. No matter how independent Nora acted, she wasn't completely free to marry at will. Father's permission, or at least acquiescence, was the social prerequisite to such a move, and he regularly failed to acquiesce.

Maggie and Jiggs lived suspended between the upper class world they couldn't enter and the lower, laboring class world they had left. Having aspired to a better life, they were unprepared to bypass the mid-range of success, which they did when they acquired instant wealth. The good things of life that they wanted were actually those of the middle rather than the upper class, but they had too much money to live in the middle. They were blue collar bodies in starched collars, and the fit was a constant problem. The ill-fit gave McManus the freedom to poke fun at all levels of society and at all the norms that defined American experience immediately at and after the turn of the century, without seriously calling into question the middle class norms his humor was based on.

Between the advent of Bringing Up Father and Blondie's first appearance in the funnies, social scientists were hard at work trying to quantify and explain the changes that were happening in American families. The trends that Calhoun had noted prior to 1919 were well established, being treated as cultural a prioris in the literature. Romance as the primary basis for marriage; individualism, especially in life goals; resistance to community control, whether of the

family community or the larger community; the easy mobility of urban life; the division of labor between husband and wife in the family economy: These comprised the matrix within which family was described.

Mowrer stated:

The establishment of a family is the process of building up organized attitudes in which all concur. Family disorganization represents the converse process in which the family complex breaks up and the ambitions and ideals of the individual members of the family become differentiated. (4)

He further contended that, "The possibility of family disintegration is thus accepted as an essential element of modern family life" (7). This premise seems virtually self-evident in the 90's, but no amount of factual information on divorce and desertion rates made it real for the 20's. "Normal" was still defined in traditional nuclear terms, and the reform that Mowrer preached was a reform back to a normal that, presumably, everyone understood and shared. This norm included a virtual demand for permanence in family and marriage, despite "the possibility of family disintegration" that had been identified. As early as 1927, "the idealized family of the nineteenth century [had] become the 'normal' family of the twentieth century" (Skolnick 307).

Mowrer's argument was predicated on his apparent faith in a prior age when family and the small community were

primary socializing influences. He used the traditional nuclear family as the touchstone by which modern family life was judged (and found wanting). And he blamed experimentation with family forms—brought on by individualism and women's greater economic independence—for the disorganization of modern family life. A nicely divided labor force, with men managing commerce and women managing home, would have solved quite nicely the problems he identified. No matter how successfully he argued against the arguments of other reformers who only wanted to return to yesteryear, his own solutions offered no new way out of the dilemma of the modern age—just another route back to his version of the days of yore.

The problem social science was faced with in the teens and twenties was a dearth of suitable alternatives to the old norms that informed their work. There is no doubt that the facts and figures they collected about families were as accurate as possible, and there is no reason to doubt either their intentions or their integrity. What is clear is that when family and its modern problems were discussed, the solutions put forth revolved around a standard nuclear family scenario. The difficulty was in defining that scenario. The reformers Mowrer argued with were mainly of Callhoun's opinion that the only good place to raise a family was in a non-urban environment. Mowrer's own solutions demanded not a return to the countryside but the will-

ingness of wives and mothers to subscribe to the newly defined post-industrial norm. Since the old social systems were no longer functional, the solution for family problems was left to the family, more specifically to the women whose work was the family. No matter which side of the urban/country line one might choose, both sides claimed the traditional nuclear family as the basis for their solutions.

Family funnies across the board supported nuclear family norms at the same time that they portrayed the changing social scene. The multifarious problems besetting hearth and home were presented as if they were as normal as the idea of the traditional nuclear family. Rather than treating problems as serious issues with life- and home-threatening potential, the funnies treated them as just a normal part of everyday life. The funnies didn't have to be especially concerned with what happened in real life because they were a part of the entertainment media system that was developing in the U.S. One beauty of the popular media is its ability to integrate seemingly irreconcilable elements in a way that makes perfect sense to audiences, and the funnies were happy to oblige. Provided the coincidences that authors use are presented convincingly enough, an audience is willing to accept almost anything, whether they Believe It or Not. The supposedly fragmented family is an excellent example.

Fragmentation, whether of the family or of the social fabric, has been of concern to social scientists for as long as there has been social science. When serious investigators look at things like privatization of the family, isolationist family attitudes, and family members pursuing personal goals, they see problems. When the funnies or other popular media look at them, they see humor, humor which is inevitable when disparate elements must accommodate each other without resorting to open warfare.

Sometimes social scientists seemed to miss the forest for the trees, occasionally confusing change with problems. For example, Mowrer wrote: "People who have become urbanized do not want to return to a primary group organization of their activities" (282); that is, people don't want an outside group like a small town population or a church to impinge on their freedoms or make demands on their time. In the funnies, all that happens is that the primary group is replaced (in varying degrees) by the nosy neighbors who live next door. The obvious conclusion is that, while the social sciences may quantify and analyze, the media simply report or reflect what is happening from day to day. Whether the neighbors actually replace the old primary group is immaterial. What matters is that they are perceived as a primary group, and in everyday affairs "people act on the basis of their perceptions of reality, not reality itself" (Berger, Signs 125).

An example of how perceptions work is easily demonstrated by a shopping trip to any mall. Dress nicely (and wear makeup if you are female) and sales clerks will flock to serve; wear jeans and forget to comb your hair and experience life in the Gulag. Perceptions played an important part in the development and popularity of Chic Young's blonde humor queen.

Blondie didn't start out as a family comic strip; Blondie was just a young woman who wanted to get ahead by marrying someone with lots of money. For three years, she kept at the task with varying degrees of success. One of her beaux was Dagwood, the suitor who most captured the imagination of the readers. When he nearly lost Blondie to one of his rivals, his fans leapt to his defense and he was reinstated as her main love interest. Dagwood's biggest problem as a protagonist was that he was the son of a wealthy railroad magnate. During the Depression, great wealth was not an element likely to sell funny papers to a public that was having trouble finding work. Chic Young solved the problem by transforming Blondie from a girl/golddigger strip to a newlywed/family strip, using lots of romanticism and family conflict to do it.

While Blondie was a fairly nice girl for a golddigger, she was not considered suitable marriage material for Dagwood; so Dagwood's father forbade the marriage. Dagwood went on a twenty-eight day hunger strike, and Mr. Bumstead

capitulated—with the proviso that Dagwood would be disinherited if the marriage went through. It did, reinforcing several dearly held public notions about middle class marriage and family life.



First, the basis for the relationship was true love, and the strength of that love served as the cornerstone for the newlyweds and later for their family. Second, Dagwood and Blondie were an independent, private family grouping once they were married. Not only did the disinheritance cut off a ready supply of money, it cut off potential interference from the in-laws. Finally, it placed Blondie and Dagwood in the same boat as most of the rest of the public. Dagwood was, of necessity, a working stiff; Blondie was, also of necessity, the homemaker. This comic strip family's genesis was precisely attributable to the romanticism + independence/individualism + economic/division of labor

equation that social science placed at the heart of family dissolution. Twelve years after they were married, the Bumsteads and their two children and six dogs were contentedly living out the American dream in their house in the suburbs. In this case, at least, the equation worked to build up rather than break down the family complex, perhaps indicating that families were decidedly more flexible than their social science definitions allowed for.

Young's conscious decisions about the strip were also an important factor in the success of the Bumstead family and the comic strip. Making Dagwood a middle class laborer, albeit in a white collar, helped make the family more reflective of the norm. Using the eat-sleep-make money-raise a family schema, along with conventions like "familiarity, nutty supporting players, embarrassing situations, mistaken identities, plans gone awry, nonsensical conflicts" and avoiding "New York gags" helped Young create a strip about family and marriage that was understood and enjoyed in virtually every urbanized culture in the world (Young and Marschall 29). By reporting and reflecting middle class behaviors, attitudes, and expectations via funny situations, Chic Young wrote his own piece of social history.

In addition to external forces playing on the Bumstead family, there were internal changes necessitated by the shift from a girl comic strip to a family comic strip. Dagwood evolved from a rich playboy to a "bumbling husband

stereotype"; Blondie went from an air head blonde to "a model of wifely patience and tolerance, the principal stabilizing element of the family" (Harvey 38). Dagwood didn't have to become brainless, but there was a funny pages convention that "marriage is debilitating and destructive of virility and masculinity" that since has "become a veritable cliché in the comics and in popular culture in general" (Berger, Comic-Stripped 106). Jiggs and his funny pages contemporaries were all portrayed as weaker and less capable than bachelors in the funnies. In the family setting, Dagwood was funnier when he bumbled, and no one had to worry about him because Blondie was there to take care of him. Not only that, but when he (or Jiggs or any other husband) did manage to win a round at home, the episode was funnier for the contrast from the usual bumbling.

Blondie's transformation was decidedly more flattering. She became the perfect homemaker "who represented the modern American woman—emancipated, capable, and superior, in many respects, to her bumbling, fumbling male partner in life" (White and Abel 9-10). While her early life wouldn't be considered especially liberated in modern terms, Blondie exercised virtually complete control of her domain, the home. In this regard, Blondie represented a growing trend within the funny pages, a trend based upon idealized male/female relationships. Blondie maintained control in her home not by superior force, as in the slapstick, early days

of the funnies, but by virtue of her right to control because of her relationship with Dagwood. Their modern marriage incorporated the promises of love and devotion with the implied contract of separation of powers between the business and domestic realms.

When Blondie first began to share the funny pages with Bringing Up Father, there was a decided generation gap between the families. Although there was a good deal of slapstick humor in Blondie, it was not of the domestic violence sort that characterized the Jiggs household. Slapstick was moving away from interpersonal violence to almost accidental violence from outside sources. Violence that originated in the home was usually directed against outsiders who invaded the home territory, with persistent peddlers the most common victims.

Another difference is that affection between husband and wife was more readily displayed in the Bumstead family. It was rare, indeed, to find Maggie and Jiggs exchanging a kiss or a hug, but not for Blondie and Dagwood. Even after they left the newlywed stage, their behavior continued to reinforce the idea that domestic bliss is founded on strong romantic love.

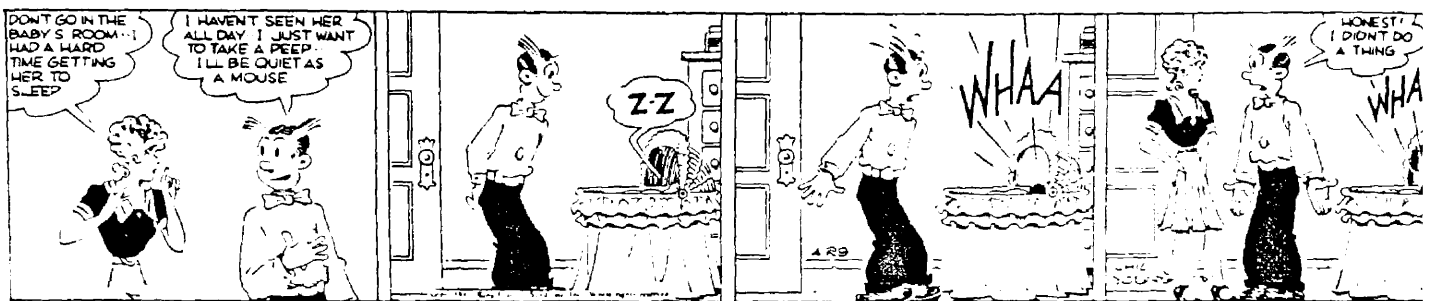
The humor in Blondie focused more on immediate family situations than on happenings outside the home. Often, these situations were related to the everyday life of a middle class working stiff who had to worry about money and

the boss. Dagwood was apt to be accosted by his boss at home when project deadlines loomed too close; these situations were then translated into domestic humor, usually with Blondie tossing out the punch line. The growing emphasis on separate goals within the domestic sphere also provided gag material. If Dagwood wanted to nap, Blondie had chores for him to do; if he wanted to take a bath, someone was sure to invade the bathroom; if he ate some cake, the cake was meant for a bake sale. The list goes on.



The most innovative thing to happen in the comic strip was Young's introduction of babies. First there was Baby Dumpling, aka Alexander, in 1934, then Cookie in 1941. Other family strips had children in them, and there were several strips about children; but Blondie was the first comic strip mother to bear children and then raise them. Alexander and Cookie grew up, at least into late adoles-

cence, right on the funny pages. Children have always been a staple of comic humor, from Tom Sawyer to Spanky and Our Gang to Growing Pains and beyond. For Blondie and Dagwood, they added yet another way for funny things to happen at home.



Overall, Blondie depicted the greater insularity of the American family that social science had described as one reaction to the Industrial Revolution. The Bumsteads had less social involvement outside of the home than earlier strips showed. Family and home attained primacy as the center of living experience, firmly replacing the world outside as the major point of reference for behavior. Blondie depicted the home as haven, the place where everyone, except Dagwood, could come to be safe from all the nasty things "out there."

Of course, Dagwood was doomed from the beginning to live in both worlds, and seldom be completely at ease in either of them, because he was the breadwinner for the family. This was not only a comic convention, but the funnies' version of

what it was like to split one's personality between home and work. Once more, a real life problem, presented as humor, offered readers some respite from dealing with the problem in their own lives. Let Dagwood manage the rigors of dealing with two different worlds five or six or even seven days a week; readers could identify with and be safely distant from the difficulties at the same time, a nearly perfect cathartic solution.

The Bumstead's portrayal of the new American family was virtually picture perfect. Not only did they behave the way typical middle class families were expected to behave, everything about their situation looked right. Their home was not opulent, but it was, just, large enough for the family and Daisy with her pups. Furniture was sparse, but there was one of everything necessary for reasonable comfort. The back yard was fenced, but the fence was more a property marker than a means of avoiding the neighbors. It was short enough for easy conversation from one yard to the next, or for the occasional accidental squirting with the garden hose.

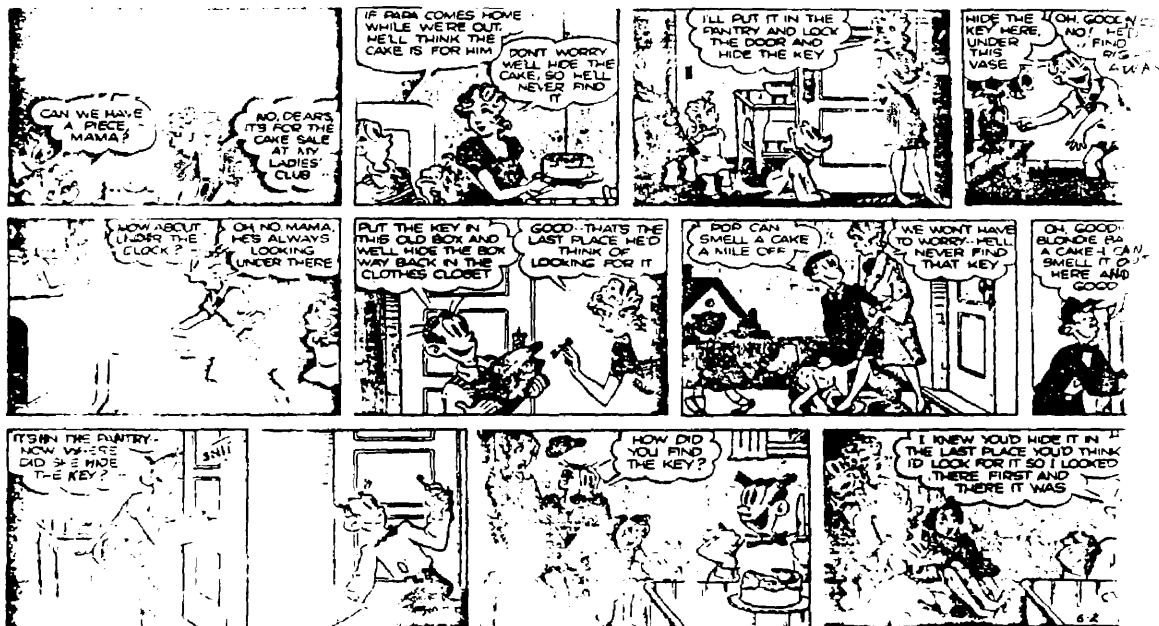
Without benefit of domestic help, Blondie kept an immaculate house, cooked all the family meals, looked after Dagwood and the children, and always appeared bandbox fresh. This particular visual rendering was obviously not completely true to life. It did, however, represent an ideal toward which homemakers were always striving, with varying degrees

of success: the clean and cozy nest. It was also an idealized version of the American Dream, modified from unlimited homesteading opportunities on the frontier to the urban integration of real estate and the means of production. The Bumsteads owned their own home, mortgage and all; Dagwood earned enough money to maintain the house and his family; within the home, the family was fairly safe from negative external influences and occurrences. While Dagwood would never be President, he still had all that a man was supposed to want and need.

Unlike McManus, Young didn't use a difference in physical size as a comic element in the strip. Instead, he made Blondie neat, always, and Dagwood slightly disheveled, always. This was a part of the role definitions in the strip: Blondie controlled the house and family. The neatness translated into intelligence as well as control, and Blondie had both. Dagwood, by extension, had little or none of either. One commentator said that "Dagwood Bumstead represents an important archetype in the American psyche—the irrelevant male." He functions as "an object of ridicule and a symbol of inadequacy and stupidity" (Berger, Comic-Stripped 103). This is an overstatement, especially when one considers other elements that are part of the grammar of this particular comic strip. The family depended on Dagwood as much as they imposed upon him; indeed, had Dagwood not fulfilled his role as wage earner, there would have been no

family to write about. And Dagwood did display wit and intelligence when it was Blondie's turn to play the "straight man."

Although Dagwood was usually the butt of the day's gag, he quite regularly managed the upper hand. When Blondie wanted to prove to her friend Tootsie that Dagwood wouldn't recognize the difference between a lampshade and a hat, he didn't. (Knowing full well that it was a lampshade, Dagwood complimented Blondie on her nice hat and saved himself the expense of buying her a new one.) Sometimes, Dagwood was simply ingenious, a trait that showed most often when food was involved. Finding the cake was simple, once he had reasoned out where the key to the cupboard was hidden.



One thing that Young did in Blondie was to emphasize the distinction between men's and women's work. The typical 90's reaction would probably be to see the distinction as

part of the male dominance mode that helped to keep women in the kitchen and men in commerce. The instances themselves, though, hardly promoted males as superior creatures. Whenever Dagwood tried his hand at women's work around the house, whether hanging a doily on a clothesline or cooking hassenpfeffer, he failed miserably, "proving" that men are just not up to the intricacies of home management.

This new approach to family life in the funnies was quite different from the goings on in the Jiggs household. Humor was more likely to be found in situations outside the home than within the confines of domestic comedy; when the action was placed at home, it regularly revolved around social obligations outside the home or around outsiders who came into the home. Home was not a haven for the family. Jiggs saw it as a part of Maggie's plan to reach the upper echelons of society, and so tried continually to escape. Maggie and Nora used it as a setting, a place to entertain outsiders and to display themselves and their things.

One factor that helps make the characters in Bringing Up Father understandable is the family's Irish background. Some of the domestic strife Jiggs experienced was related to this Irish background in that, while he was supposed to provide the house, Maggie was supposed to bring her "things" to furnish it. Played out against the backdrop of post-Industrial Revolution America, this Irish attitude reinforced the division of labor mentality without maintaining

the equality of person that the Irish method supported. In Ireland, the house would always have been Jiggs', regardless of how careful he had to be of Maggie's furniture. In America, the cult of domesticity had defined the house as the woman's, and therefore Maggie's, domain. She kept her Irish "things" and got the house as well.

Aside from cultural baggage that accompanied Maggie and Jiggs from "the auld sod," it is also true that this family had its genesis at a time when families had not quite assimilated the social reordering caused by the Industrial Revolution. What they had to work through was the same redefinition of family that families throughout America were coping with. In a situation that was now relatively unstressed from the outside, the internal stresses within the family came to the fore. Unanswered questions about the new family order, attitudes carried over from the old country, and the achievement-equals-money norm defined the Jiggs family on the funny pages. Their second generation counterparts were defined otherwise.

Blondie and Dagwood entered the picture at a time when families in general had accepted or adapted to the restructuring brought on by the Industrial Revolution. The big city, big industry, and work for wages had become the norm. Mom took care of home and children, and Dad went off to the office or factory; God was in his heaven and all was right with the world. The Bumsteads were defined by romantic

love, a settled and assimilated social order, a thoroughly American ethnicity, and an national economy that had begun to crumble when they started their family. They were ideally situated to represent what was now considered the norm in American family life.

It is important to remember that, although the Bumsteads and the Jiggses were contemporaries on the funny pages, they were from different generations and different backgrounds. Not only should comic strips be considered in historical context, they should be considered within the context of each of their unique histories because "the comic strip is an iterative art form, so that the events of a given day in a given strip have meaning in terms of past events in the strip. Comic strips carry their history with them, we might say" (Berger, Comic-Stripped 14). While Maggie and Jiggs were funny pages contemporaries of Blondie and Dagwood, they represented a much earlier stage in family accommodation to industrialization; these two funny families offer early and late perspectives on the effects of the same phenomenon. The late perspective, as represented by the Bumsteads, might even be seen as welcome news that the family had not succumbed to the pressures of social change.

In the funnies, family was not perceived as having disintegrated, despite expert predictions to the contrary; it had adapted to a substantially changed social order. There was every indication that the transition had reached a

peaceful stage on the home front, and not a moment too soon. The Depression was a time that tried everyone's souls, child, woman, and man. A predictable, even if restrictive, family was a blessing when the rest of the social fabric was in tatters. So Blondie and Dagwood flourished by being the Everyman and family that survived, even if they didn't run the world.

By 1945, twelve years after their trip down the aisle, Blondie and Dagwood were still happily married and living in the suburbs with their two children and six dogs. The Depression was a bad memory, World War II had been won, men were reclaiming the jobs women had managed while the men were away. The Bumsteads and the Jiggses managed the war years entirely at home. Maggie served for a while as an Air Raid Warden; Blondie kept a frugal wartime household. Dagwood and Jiggs simply carried on as usual. The war was not unimportant so much as it was kept at bay. There was plenty of distressing real news to read every day without letting something as big and unmanageable as a world war taint the funny side of the funny pages. Many strips did deal directly with the war, usually the serious ones rather than the humor strips. But once the war was over and the men came home, the stage was set for life to return to normal. And in case anyone had forgotten what normal life was like, the funny pages families were there as a reminder.

The post-war baby boom was one of the signals that life outside the funnies was getting back to normal. What could be more normal than getting married and starting a family? In the funnies, Blondie and Dagwood had the edge on the families of returning GI's: Cookie and Alexander were past diapers and into the cute kid stage. They occasionally were the specific focus for humor in the strip, but more often they augmented the humor centered on the action between Blondie and Dagwood. Still, they were relatively normal children in a relatively normal household, and their continuing presence pointed up a continuing preoccupation with children in the middle of this century of the child. Meanwhile, Maggie and Jiggs continued their daily battle of wits and airborne household articles, with most rounds going to Maggie. These two families continued to provide the archetypical funny pages forms of family and married life for the first post-war decade.

Funnies were still seen as simple entertainment, with a few exceptions like Pogo, Krazy Kat, and political cartoonists with issues to assail.

Instead of a message, the comic strip contains the mirrored image of its readers. Thus it is that the comics come to be the folk play of the American masses, produced on an infinitesimal stage built by the technical apparatus of the time for

the needs of a mass public that breathes its own life into the end-product. (Politzer 43)

It is true that most artists weren't trying to promote any particular ideology, but the mirror they held up explicated the ideology of the time. Though the reflection may have been skewed, it wasn't entirely without foundation; what it lacked in behavioral reality, it made up for in fairly accurately recorded perceptions. When Maggie and Jiggs retired from the funny pages two years after McManus' death in 1954, they were not replaced with another warring family but with a new generation of family comic strips that extended the post-industrial metaphor that Blondie represented so well, the cohesive family unit.

The family comic strips that appeared in the early to mid-1950's depicted people who were much more acclimated to urban society than their earlier counterparts. The time clock was a part of the natural order of the universe, husbands and wives expected to spend more time away from each other than together, children and parents had separate and sometimes conflicting goals. Yet none of this was seen as problematic because most of the population had grown up in post-industrial America. The social milieu revolved around an established technological economy. More rapid technological change, including the influence of television, was beginning to affect social institutions like the family,

but only just. Changes were still perceived as being within manageable bounds:

The family at present is an adaptive institution; that is, it does not originate changes but constantly seeks to adjust to changes set in motion by the more powerful economic forces. . . . To understand the family, it is therefore necessary to understand the situation in which it functions.
(Cavan 31)

Cavan saw role definitions as one of the primary problems facing families in the early 50's. The old roles remained intact because new roles had not yet developed in response to changes in the social order (20).

The most difficult aspect of dealing with change has always been deciding what is essential and what is overlay, and new role definitions will almost always be seen as overlay, at least at first. Rising divorce rates, an overlay on the old social order, had been viewed with great alarm by social scientists, courts, and clergy, all of whom were committed to maintaining the status quo; but perceptions were changing.

In 1946, Norine Foley wrote an article in the St. Louis Post Dispatch expressing grave concern over the increasing number of divorces in the U.S. Some of these were seen as the result "hasty war marriages"; some were attributed to the "economic independence of women"; and fault was invari-

ably ascribed to the individuals involved for the failure of these marriages. The solution prescribed in the article was a required course for all persons applying for marriage licenses, apparently on the analogy of licensing drivers. The presumption was made that an educated spouse would be a faithful and permanent spouse, since that person would enter the marriage relationship knowing what was expected (1).

Seven years later, social science offered another perspective on high divorce rates:

The significant factor is not increasing divorce but the change from a concept of family as a permanent socially responsible unit to one as an association of husband and wife for such a period of time as both believe the marriage contributes more to their personal happiness than would some other arrangement. (Cavan 11-12)

Cavan wasn't opposed to permanence; she had simply identified that the demands of individualism and personal happiness had taken precedence over older social prescriptions about marriage. Her concern was that people recognize this change and integrate the individual into the marriage equation. That way more marriages would remain intact.

The average modern family of 1953 was envisioned as a nuclear family grouping that permitted full individual expression to each of its members. The family was "developing distinctive functions—the mutual meeting of personality

needs of the husband and wife, and the personality development of the children" along with providing "loving response, and the bearing and rearing of children," functions considered "more fundamental to the person and society than the purposes served by other associations" (Cavan 111-113).

Based on the, by now, traditional concept of the urban nuclear family, this interpretation didn't demand the usual division of labor but was effectively impossible without it. The time clock approach to labor that industry required made no provision for the vagaries of family life. Therefore, one spouse had to be free to meet industry demands while the other maintained the nest. There was no real question as to which spouse was expected to fulfill which role.

Hi and Lois debuted in 1954, and their coming was heralded in advertisements for several weeks before they actually took up residence on the funny pages. Among the family's attributes were Lois, "the cutest little homemaker since Blondie," four children, a dog named Dawg, and Hi, the man of the family (Walker n.p.). They were ideal post-war baby boom representatives.

Hiram Flagston was a middle manager for a non-descript manufacturing concern. He earned the family's single income, providing reasonably for everyone, and took care of the yard after the family moved to the suburbs. Lois was the perfect housewife, always in an attractive dress and wearing an apron while she cooked and cleaned. She mothered

everyone and everything, from Hi to baby shrubberies, attended all the right meetings, and was always available to the family. Chip was the oldest child. He was about ten in 1954. His twin sister and brother, Dot and Ditto, were around age five or six. Trixie was the cute little baby.

Hi and Lois incorporated several new elements into the grammar of the funny pages family. At first, Hi was a strong, manly sort of man, the kind who would have come home from World War II or Korea ready to control as well as live in the world he had helped to make safe for democracy. He softened somewhat over time, but he never bumbled the way that Dagwood did. In later years, Mort Walker described him as "a bit of a failure" (n.p.), meaning, that he was not the sort to make company president. Failure in this context, however, did not extend to a failed marriage or family.

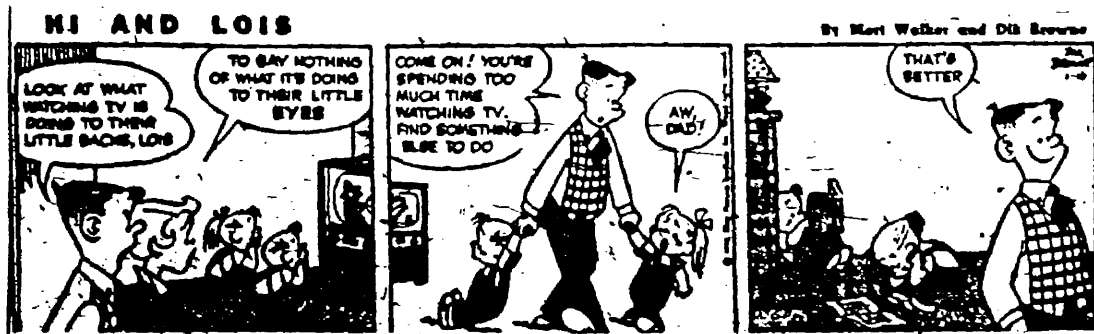
Hi was not abused by his family, as Dagwood often was. When the humor was at Hi's expense, it was more likely to be the result of a silly woman thing that Lois did or a confrontation with the garbage collectors or a neighbor. Hi spent lots of time with his family, and he and Lois often managed time for just the two of them.

Lois was a picture perfect housewife, much in the visual mold of Blondie. She did not, however, take advantage of Hi, never having trained as a golddigger. She wasn't above using a little trickery to get Hi to help around the house, but her ploys were not intrusive on Hi's

relaxation the way Blondie's tended to be toward Dagwood. The house Lois kept was always tidy, meals were always ready on time, and her children were reasonably well-behaved and clean.

The children in Hi and Lois had personalities at least as distinctive as their parents. Chip suffered the usual oldest-child trauma of little kids in the house, and he used his room as his private haven within the home. Dot and Ditto played out a miniature battle of the sexes, which was rather odd since Hi and Lois didn't behave that way. The twins were almost a throwback to Maggie and Jiggs, but without the identified flying objects. Baby Trixie was innocence itself, except when she was making shrewd observations about human nature. Of course, she couldn't talk, so no one but Dawg ever knew what was going on in her head. Action in the strip often revolved around things the children did and said, placing the strip firmly in the new age of the child-centered family. "The concept of the child as a human personality to be developed," a middle class norm, had entered the vocabulary of the funnies (Cavan 104).

Where movies, sometimes radio, and even more occasionally plays had entered into earlier comic strip action, the Flagston family had to contend with television. Except for an infrequent romantic movie for Lois or sporting event for Hi, television belonged to the children. The content of programs and the children's reactions to the programs caused



mild parental concern, but no serious worry. Hi preferred to have Dot and Ditto watch violence on television rather than perpetrate it on each other, and reading was obviously better than television watching. Baby Trixie was disappointed to learn that when she grew up she would still be called "Baby." (The "tube" doesn't seem to have changed much in thirty-eight years.)

Television was not then as pervasive an influence as it has become today, but the Flagston children watched even more television than television family children. Without attempting to analyze, Walker and Browne recorded social history by reporting what people were doing. They also reported certain attitudes that were prevalent by commenting on program content.

The Flagstons attended church regularly, and the children said their prayers at night. There was almost a halo

around many of their family activities, and it was intentional. According to Mort Walker, he and Dik Browne:

thought we would show the positive side of a family. The kids are cute. The parents love each other. It's a nuclear family against the world rather than against each other. They're against crabgrass and traffic and taxes. We took the meanness out of it. (Walker n.p.)

One result of "nicing up" the family is that the home became joint property again. Hi could come home from a hard day at work and find the haven he needed, unless, of course, he tried to relax in the back yard. There he was sure to be accosted by his neighbor Thirsty or by the children or Dawg. Even Lois couldn't protect him when he was outside the house.

The amazing thing about this picture perfect family was that it so nicely rendered the idealized nineteenth century family as if it were a twentieth century reality. Most probably the reason was related to the fact that Hi and Lois were solidly middle class. "The middle position, with the possibility of upward mobility and the threat of downward, makes the middle class very conscious of social values and also very conservative" (Cavan 98). Long considered the backbone of American society, the middle class, as reflected by the Flagstons, was a good place to be. Hi and Lois were family the way it was meant to be.

Rising divorce rates notwithstanding, this happy suburban family fit almost perfectly the perceptions people continued to have of American family life. A man's home was his castle, his wife was his helpmate, and his children were chips off the old block. These values were reinforced by television programs, radio shows, happily-ever-after movies, popular novels, even public education. Dick and Jane were part of a model normal family that was twin to the Flagstones. Whether people managed it or not, this was what they wanted family to be. It is possible that, in the peacetime world of the Cold War, the safe haven of the family was the best that could be hoped for; and it was ostensibly within the reach and control of the average person. Whatever the reason, what the public wanted was Hi and Lois and the suburbs.

On a continuum from the industrial to the technological revolution, Hi and Lois are further removed from Blondie and Dagwood than the Bumsteeds are from Maggie and Jiggs. By the time Hi and Lois came along, the transition from a rural to an industrial economy had been completed. For the average middle class person, there was no ambivalence left about which way to run society. American ingenuity had created an industrial marvel, and the market economy effectively defined the appropriate form of family life. That the form was attainable by a fairly small segment of society and that it often disintegrated made it no less desirable. People

behaved as if they expected marriages and families to be "permanent socially responsible unit[s]." That value still defined the family norm in America.

Hi and Lois had strong romantic love as the foundation of their marriage and family, as had Blondie and Dagwood. Both couples had children, pets, a mortgaged back yard, and neighbors who befriended and sometimes intruded on them. The major difference between the families was in their attitudes about children. The Flagston family wasn't centered on the children, but the children were thoroughly integrated into the family unit and into the comic strip action. Hi and Lois conscientiously pursued their roles as parents. The Bumstead children, on the other hand seemed to pop in and out of the action, depending upon whether their presence was essential to the day's gag. Blondie and Dagwood were affectionate parents, but parenting was much less important to them than it was to Hi and Lois. The transition to a child-centered culture was well underway.



Full Circle?

Somewhere between Leave It To Beaver and Married--With Children the old rural-style family economy experienced a revival in the form of the dual-income family. With children in the care of the school system, both parents were free to engage in gainful employment. (In many cases, of course, this second income was a necessity rather than a free choice.) Children became more independent of their families, because they were spending so much time away from family members. Mom was no longer presumed to be at home in an apron but out earning a living, thus losing some of her control at home. Dad's control over the family, by way of the checkbook, diminished because finances became a shared responsibility. However, home, as the base from which everyone leaves and to which everyone returns, reached a new level of importance as the one stable and predictable place in a variable universe. The new family had arrived--again.

One of the characteristics of the nuclear family of the 1970's:

is a special sense of solidarity that separates the domestic unit from the surrounding community. Its members feel that they have much more in common with one another than they do with anyone else on the outside--that they enjoy a privileged emotional climate they must protect from outside

intrusion, through privacy and isolation. (Shorter 205)

The problem with such a tightly bound group is "that intimate relations inevitably involve antagonism and hostility as well as love" (Skolnick 313). True enough, but this was not news, anymore than the privatization of the family was news. By the 1970's, social scientists had also identified the individual as the true "center of gravity" in the family and in society (Cavan 112). The popular media had a less definitive opinion, presenting several different interpretations of family-to-individual behaviors that shared a common thread.

According to Wahlstrom:

The media as a whole, however, have assigned the family to a secondary position. In doing so, they are following a more general cultural consensus about the family's relative importance, or, at least, reflecting a traditional view common to much of American history and literature, the idea that the individual is our primary concern. (198)

This concern for the individual was especially evident in television situation comedies where plots often revolved around one family member's efforts to solve a personal problem. While the individual operated from the home, the place where values were instilled and coping mechanisms learned, resolution of problems generally happened outside

the home. The denouement for the typical episode revolved around the family members all patting each other on the back for having done such a fine job managing a difficult situation.

Despite the growing preoccupation with the individual in the society at large, family comic strips continue to promote the "sentimental ideology of the family in all its forms [assuming] the family must compensate for the harsh realities of life outside the home" (Skolnick 308). Sentimentally, the family remains unit-centered rather than member-centered, despite the increasing number of individual demands that members place on the family unit. For Better or For Worse effectively demonstrates the trials involved in making the family work as a unit full of individuals.

Premiering in 1979, the strip was described as "a realistic series [that] succeeded in evoking the pleasures and pains of domesticity without ever descending into either sentimentality or cynicism" (Wepman 137). This particular strip is a Canadian import, but there is nothing not identifiably American about its family. In the beginning, family roles were defined much as they had been in Hi and Lois: Ellie, the wife and mother, kept house and cared for the children; John, the husband and father and a dentist, earned the family income; Michael and Elizabeth, the two children, were typical warring and loving brother and sister; Farley was the big, dumb family dog.

It was not the Hi and Lois organization of the family that was so realistic. Rather, realism was established through the absolutely average concerns the family dealt with from day to day. Chic Young's eat-sleep-earn money-raise a family formula was just as effective in the 80's as it had been for Blondie in the 30's. What was different about Lynn Johnston's strip was way she brought the family's backstage life into public view. Not only did readers get the punch line or final revelation, they were taken through the personal processes that led to the climax of each day's strip.

Readers were invited into the family circle by being made privy to many of the personal and group behaviors that most families keep private. Ellie in her nightgown looks the way you would expect a woman to look who has just rolled out of bed. (Unlike Blondie, who is always beautifully groomed no matter what time of day or night.) John's work smile has nothing to do with how he really feels. Aggravating things children say or do cause angry reactions from parents. Skolnick said that the norm of family privacy helps obscure the realities of family life because the backstage area where family functions is not accessible to the public observer (299-300). This probably explains why Johnston's treatment of backstage issues is so appealing. Readers can recognize in the Pattersons many of the same dynamics present in their own lives.

The privacy of American family life isolates families from each other; what happens at home in the family is supposed to be kept within the confines of the home. The on-stage behaviors families exhibit keep backstage life out of public view thereby maintaining distance from the neighbors. As a result, families and their members may well feel that any given home and family experience is unique in the world. Having a glimpse of some other family's backstage life helps break down the illusion that no one else knows



what life is like for Mr. and Mrs. Average. Other people do look frowsy in the morning, their children do fight with each other, and good parents do get angry with their children. These things are just a bit easier to manage in the funnies than in real life.

Some time after both Michael and Elizabeth were in school, Ellie went back to work. She experienced feelings

of guilt for neglecting her family, anxiety over performing both her roles well, and doubt about whether pursuing her career warranted forcing the family to adjust to her job. In other words, she dealt with all the same difficulties that other working mothers experience. As is typical of funny pages families, the Pattersons apparently adjusted with minimal difficulty.

For Better or For Worse is virtually the only strip to approach family life from the perspective of the mother and the children. John is certainly an important character, but he is not the center of attention, either as the stooge or as king of the roost. He is a member of the family and his personality and interactions with the children are inter-



preted through the eyes of his wife. This point of view tends to personalize the action in the strip, giving it an intimate quality not present in comic strips that use an

omniscient narrator. Ellie Patterson, wife, mother, and diarist, shares those secrets of the heart and hearth that every mother since Little Women's Marmee has been presumed to possess. She is just more likely to do so in sweats over coffee instead of in white gloves at afternoon tea.

Children are one of the primary foci in For Better or For Worse, as they were in Hi and Lois, but they are much more integrated into the overall action than the Flagston kids. The new generation are fully enfranchised members of the family. While they are still expected to respect their parents and behave like good children should, they are also quite free to speak their minds. They are allowed their own personalities and opinions, and they are treated with respect by their parents. All this is quite in keeping with the most current professional opinions on how best to turn children into responsible human beings.

Ellie Patterson quit work when she became pregnant again. After the new baby, April, arrived, she decided to go back to work. Eventually, she was able to arrange things so that she could work from home. This was the ideal solution to the modern dilemma of how to cope with an infant while maintaining her personal identity. It was also an excellent means of presenting the variety of coping mechanisms family members use when the family structure is disrupted, even for a happy event like a new baby. Ellie received lots of help and support from her husband and lots

of grief from her two older children who were expected to help care for their baby sister (not unlike their rural counterparts of the pre-industrial era). In time, Michael and Elizabeth were won over by the new arrival, and everything worked out the way it should. All the family members were recognized and accepted as such, and all the family members adapted themselves to the new Patterson in their midst.

While For Better or For Worse is peopled by thoroughly modern individuals, and while it doesn't shy away from the less than pleasant aspects of family life, it remains an idealized representation of family. No difficulty is ever presented as if it were insurmountable, and things have a habit of working out for the best, given enough time and support from the family. Serious problems, such as the abuse of Michael's friend, happen in other families. Statistically, the Pattersons are in the minority; psychologically, they are the reality people would like to create for themselves.

The fact that images are incongruent with behavior does not mean that they are unimportant. . . .

Images may not correctly represent the social order, but they influence what people do, what they think they are doing, and what they say they are doing. (Skolnick 301)

For Better or For Worse portrays family the way people think it should be. The Patterson home is a warm, loving haven where stress, sadness, and even anger are permitted because they are a real part of life. Mom and Dad and the kids have more in common with each other than with outsiders, no matter how often peer pressure affects the kids. No problem is insurmountable because everyone in the family is committed to the group and each of them can be counted on to cooperate for the good of the unit as well as the good of the individuals.

This representation is quite unlike the interpretation of family as seen through the eyes of social science. Shorter defined three specific areas where family life is changing: a split between the generations that makes adolescents indifferent to the family's identity; instability in the life of the couple as evidenced by high divorce rates; and a "systematic demolition of the 'nest notion' of nuclear family life that a new liberation for women has meant" (269-270). It may well be that part of the success of family comic strips like For Better or For Worse has been their ability to present an idealized but attainable norm: an understanding family atmosphere where adolescents don't disinherit their families; stable relationships that survive despite problems; and nests that protect children and husbands as well as mothers who might also be career women.

The effort that inheres in building such a family unit

is no more nor less than that required for building any successful career. The difference is that in career situations people usually recognize where they ought to refrain from making demands and claiming rights. In families, people all too often make unreasonable demands because they feel they have rights to certain things within a family setting. The trouble is that family members who attempt to use old definitions to justify their demands find themselves in conflict with family members who have differing expectations.



Skolnick puts forth the "perfectionist" view of family as one cause of domestic violence, calling violence "in some measure 'normal'" because "of the stresses and strains that may be found in most if not all families" (314). She further sees "in the current disillusion with family life some hope for the future." For Skolnick, hope lies in this

disillusion with the concept of home as haven. "Once we are no longer convinced that we may find heaven by withdrawing from the world, we may try harder to change it" (315). Perhaps, but until some alternative to the family arises, home will remain the place people expect to serve as a haven.

In 1963, White and Abel claimed:

Because of their unique function of appealing to all classes and areas of society, the comics usually deal with the continuum of American life, with undercurrents which do not change direction from decade to decade nor, in some instances, from generation to generation. (13)

The undercurrents dealing with family have not changed substantially in ninety years, and they are a source of concern to social science because beliefs and values about family fail to coincide with measurable reality. So long as people act on the basis of beliefs, values, and perceptions, however, reflections from popular media like the funnies will continue to carry more social weight than all the findings of scientific studies.

Not many individuals had or have a living situation as ordered as the Cleaver's was in Leave It to Beaver, but the desire for something like that informs decisions people make every day about how to manage home and family. A comic strip like For Better or For Worse helps make those deci-

sions more realistic because it goes deeper than the laugh for the day, often using humor to make a serious point. Everyone has problems and stresses all too similar to the ones the Pattersons experience; what this particular strip offers are functional alternatives for dealing with them. They look like us, and they act in ways we might well wish to emulate.



Visual representation of the Patterson family complements the more intimate nature of the strip. In a jeans and t-shirt era, they are a jeans and t-shirt family. Everything about their physical appearance is in keeping with the less formal mood of the late twentieth century. Mom is more likely to wear jeans than a dress when she is at home, and makeup doesn't seem to be a priority; the kids wear tennies and jeans to school; Dad almost never wears a tie outside of office hours or church; it is normal to find the whole

family in pajamas dealing with a morning crisis like missing the garbage collector or the school bus. Hi and Lois exemplified the increasing informality of family life in the generation after Blondie and Dagwood; John and Ellie do the same for the generation after Hi and Lois.

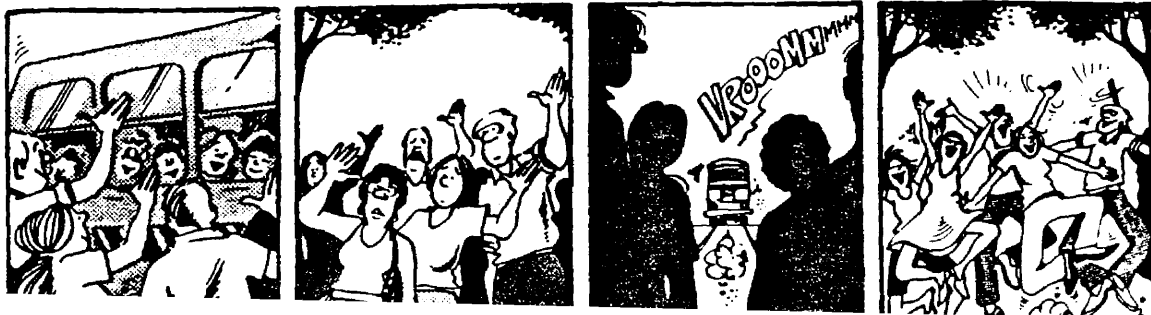
While Hi and Lois started life at a time when society in general had adapted to a new mode of family life, John and Ellie came on the scene when definitions were again in flux. Between the late 50's and early 70's technology was changing faster than most people cared to keep up with. Civil rights activism forced society to acknowledge the disparity between our beliefs and our behaviors as a free country. The rise of the "yuppie" gave new life to the notion that success equals money. A revival of feminism, combined with greater variety in career opportunities and changes in medical technology that gave women greater freedom, had created a situation where prior definitions of roles for men and women were no longer apt.

Feminist awareness, in turn, made individualism and personal identity primary concerns for both women and men. Men were likely to feel that self-expression for women meant repression for men. Women were likely to be combative in their efforts to equalize life opportunities between men and women. The result of these changes is a cultural milieu actively promoting 1) individual over group concerns, 2) the idea that success equals high income, and 3) human/minority

rights; and in that context, the Pattersons' cozy little home seems almost a throwback to the Dark Ages. A more likely explanation is that it embodies the kind of safe harbor that so many people strive for in the age of technology.

Consider the sending-the-children-to-camp scenario so popular in assorted popular media: Should Michael go to summer camp? Of course he should, it will be good for him. But he's so young to spend such a long time away from home. Don't worry, the counselors are trained professionals, the camp has been running a successful program for seventy-five years, quit worrying. I know, but what if he gets sick or something? There's a doctor on staff, and Michael is as healthy as a horse, just quit worrying. I know, but he's my little boy. There, there, dear, don't worry.

The big day comes and all the parents are standing at the bus station saying their farewells to their adolescent campers-to-be. A few moms sniff audibly, some wipe away a surreptitious tear, dads give manly handshakes, and, finally, the bus rumbles off, leaving a group of woebegone parents waving good-bye. But woebegone becomes "wiotous" once the bus is out of sight. For six blessed weeks, the parents are free of adolescent assault. General rejoicing follows.



Are these heartless, unconcerned parents? Certainly not, but they do epitomize the modern American family. Without the teenagers to intrude, the individual moms and dads can have some time to themselves. Fortunately, the moms and dads can afford to send the kids to camp. Besides, it's only right and fair that the kids get a good idea of life outside the city, that parents' rights to time alone be considered once in a while, and that people be able to reap the economic fruits of their efforts. At least in the funnies, everybody is getting something of value and no one is suffering unduly for anyone else's benefit.

No matter how poor the chances seem to be for a successful marriage, Americans still behave as if traditional marriage patterns define the norms of family life. Alternative living arrangements for persons of opposite sex are still viewed with some displeasure, ranging from mild disapproval to open hostility; hostility is amplified considerably when the alternative arrangement involves two persons of the same sex. Having a baby is still the primary criterion that determines when a married couple becomes a family. All of these attitudes help to maintain the concept of the nuclear family nest as the definitive norm for family, no matter how people behave in reality. That other attitudes are developing is evidenced by the representations of alternative families in the media.

Is There Another Way?

As times changed, so did comic strips. From the era of Bringing Up Father to the present, changes in clothing, home furnishings, entertainment, and even attitudes about interpersonal relations have been faithfully recorded.

On the funny pages continuum, each successive generation has spawned family comic strips to suit its time and place. The four strips used for this paper—Bringing Up Father, Blondie, Hi and Lois, and For Better or For Worse—each represents best the era when each was created. They change over time, but always within the context of their own histories, and as a group they present a fairly accurate picture of what has changed and what has not vis-à-vis perceptions and attitudes about family in America.

For Better or For Worse appears to have little in common with Bringing Up Father, but this is not really the case. It is more that they are different interpretations of the same phenomenon than that they are different phenomena. Chronologically, Maggie and Jiggs might well be the parents of Blondie and Dagwood, the grandparents of Hi and Lois, and the great grandparents of Ellie and John; sociologically, each succeeding family develops within and reacts to a world substantially different from, even though bred from, the world of the preceding generation.

Maggie and Jiggs came on the scene at a time when family definitions were being revised to fit an urban,

industrial situation. There were also large numbers of immigrants coming into the country who brought their own versions of family with them. What there was of American identity was a conglomerate of many, often conflicting, perspectives, despite the fact that the White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant identity was held up as the norm. Politically, the country was somewhat isolationist with a militaristic bent where American interests were involved—no matter where in the world, setting a social tone of might makes right. Humor, at least at the popular culture level, tended to the physical. The slapstick humor of the Gay Nineties offered an active, if vicarious, outlet for the stresses of the period.

Pratfalls and flying crockery translated readily to the funnies, offering the perfect backdrop to the domestic battle Maggie and Jiggs fought for their entire married life. Having established their pattern of physical humor and family combat early in their history, Maggie and Jiggs knew no other way to relate. In part, this was a class distinction ascribed specifically to Irish immigrants who were considered combative and crass, unable to appreciate delicacy and finesse. In part, it was an expression of the sort of physical humor people expected in a low brow entertainment medium like the funnies. Finally, it was indicative of the sorts of problems many families in transition

were facing. Maggie and Jiggs' audience would probably not have recognized them in any other guise.

Mike Gets a Loving Reception.



Blondie and Dagwood were part of a romanticized time when personal choice and love were supposed to be the basis for marriage. Physical humor still played a major role in the entertainment media, having translated from stage to screen and radio as readily as it had to the funnies, and Dagwood was destined to be the fall guy. The shift away from domestic to external violence made his misadventures a result of external forces, helping to create a sense of home as haven from the world. While Dagwood couldn't really



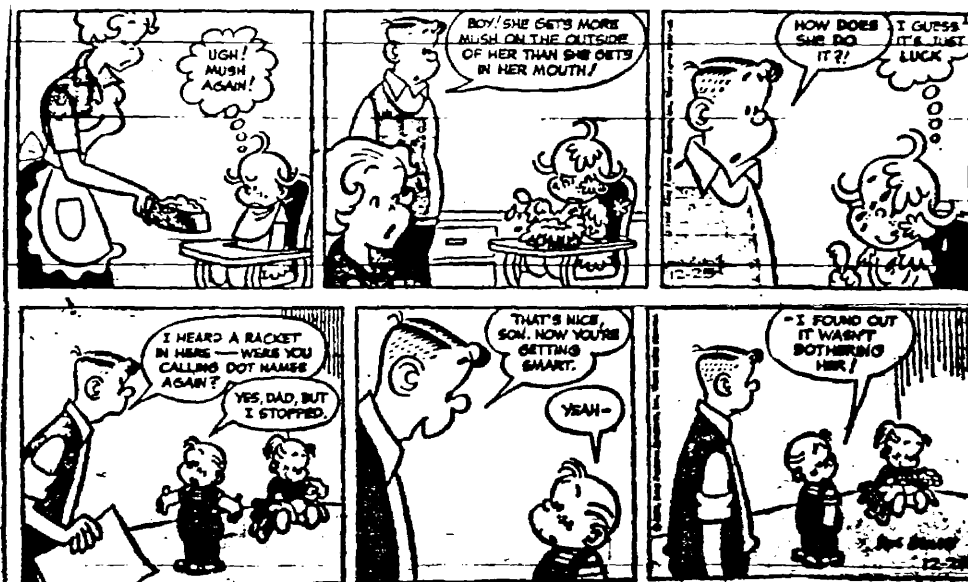
claim a safe haven at home, he was at least free from physical attack by his family, and that was a beginning.

Regular expressions of affection from Blondie indicated the beginning, as well, of straightforward communication between spouses. The norm was not fully established in the media or in the culture, but it was coming to be accepted as a positive change in the conduct of relationships. Where once men were supposed to be able just to know how their fiancés or wives felt, women in the new era were starting to tell men what was really going on. That didn't stop Blondie from playing old games like you-don't-understand or you-act-just-like-a-man. After all, her early years were spent in a milieu where those games were considered normal. Still, Blondie's expressions of concern for Dagwood were genuine and helped establish the age to come when more open communication would be considered the norm in families.

By the time that Hi and Lois appeared, the transition to home as haven was complete and slapstick humor was virtually extinct except in re-runs of Three Stooges episodes. Husbands and wives were expected to communicate with each other, although there were lingering vestiges of that's-just-like-a-woman and you-don't-understand-women games. These, however, were much less likely to occur in the Flagston household, probably because Hi and Lois spent so much of their energy on their children. Not only did Lois spend most of her days chasing after, feeding, and otherwise

caring for the children; when Hi came home from work, he spent time doing things with the kids. He filled the role of father as companion, Lois that of the nurturing mother.

Children were not considered the blessing they had been when they could be expected to contribute to the family economy, nor were they a burden because of their drain on family resources. They had become, instead, a future resource to be developed as fully as possible, and parents were responsible for the development. Hi and Lois took that



charge seriously, and it showed in the greater emphasis on children in this strip than in earlier strips.

For Better or For Worse came on the scene when the individual had been accepted as the point of reference for social intercourse and interpersonal relations. Although the strip presented a picture of family as a cohesive unit, the vagaries inherent in individualized goals pursued by

members of a unit are portrayed sympathetically. It represents a stage beyond family concern for children because everyone's needs and concerns are addressed: Moms and dads are people, too, you know. The result is a strip whose characters are fairly well-rounded, full personalities and who seem to be the kind of people who might live next door.



Each of these strips has run for several years, and, as might be expected from a reflective medium like the funnies, changes in the socio-cultural milieu are evident within each strip over time. Obvious things like clothing styles might almost be overlooked because people are less likely to notice things that are common in the culture; readers see what they expect. But the ladies of the funnies have always been fashion-conscious within their means.

Maggie had the wherewithal to indulge her sense of style at the best shops. She may have had a blue collar

underneath, but she knew how to dress herself and her daughter to the nines. Blondie and Lois had more limited budgets and so had to shop in more pedestrian environs. Chic Young used the Sears catalogue to keep Blondie in style, making her as average as was possible for someone who didn't age. Lois undoubtedly shopped at Sears as well, unless she preferred J.C. Penney. Wherever they shopped, in their early incarnations and throughout most of their funny pages lives, they both dressed according to the June Cleaver and Donna Reed school of housekeeping. As everyday dress approached the more casual mode of the 80's and 90's, Blondie and Lois were seen more often in slacks. They both wear dresses much more often than Ellie, but this is in keeping with their backgrounds. Most changes in men's styles have been fairly recent. Dagwood and Hi both have sported shorts on appropriate occasions in the past, but sweatsuits are becoming more and more common for those hanging-around-the-house times.

Home furnishings also changed, but with an even less notable effect than changes in clothing styles. Since the funny papers houses are rather sparsely furnished, there hasn't been too much to change. Blondie has traded in the old candlestick telephone and now has an up-to-date touch-tone phone in a fashion color, and her kitchen appliances have been updated. Hi and Lois have had a television in the living room all along, and Lois has a wall phone in the

kitchen, that all important accessory when someone calls while she is preparing dinner. The Pattersons home includes a computer among its accoutrements. Generally, home decor is a distinctly background item unless it is used as the focus for a particular day's strip.

More than physical changes have been reflected in the funnies. While Lois retains her responsibility for managing the home, she has also taken on a career as a real estate agent. This particular job is a nice, safe transitional job for a wife and mother because it can usually be done evenings and weekends, leaving Mom free to keep house as usual the rest of the time. Blondie more recently put her cooking talent to work by starting a catering business with Tootsie. This is also a job that can be done from home, causing the least disruption of the established order. Only Ellie worked outside the home for a time, but even she now has a home office.

In the cases of Blondie and Hi and Lois, sons who carried on their fathers' work brought their own interpretations of characters and situations to the work. It would be difficult to envision Chic Young or Dik Browne giving Blondie or Lois any serious interests outside the home. But Dean Young and Chris Browne are products of a later generation, and working wives are now considered normal. As it is, these careers are essentially add-ons that bring these traditional middle class families into the modern age. They

don't represent life goals these women had in addition to being wives and mothers. Ellie Patterson, on the other hand, was a career woman from the beginning. She just put her career on hold briefly until she could arrange the perfect career from home situation.

The changes in family recorded in the funnies are not limited to strips technically definable as family comic strips. Alternative family structures have been a commonplace of the funny pages since they began; in the 90's these alternative families aren't seen so much as aberrations, as they once were, but as adaptations to modern society. Where no nuclear family is presented as the foundation for a comic strip, one is often either implied or constructed from among the individual characters in the strip. Consider these alternative families that have cropped up in the funnies in the last twenty-five years or thirty years.

Peanuts is thirty-two years old, and no adult has ever entered a panel. The children are a family unto themselves, managing their own affairs and attending to their cohort's needs adequately, if not generously. Charlie Brown is the bumbling father type. He always knows how things should go, and they never go his way. Sally and Lucy share the wife and mother role, usually harassing Charlie. The other characters in the strip take turns filling various family roles, as the day's script requires. And no matter how many

problems the characters have with each other, they always come back for more.

The Peanuts gang bears a strong affinity to the Our Gang group of the 30's. Without benefit of adult supervision and guidance, these youngsters manage to produce pageants at school (in the televised versions), run a Little League style baseball team, and even have Thanksgiving celebrations (also on television). Adults are always avail-



able and sometimes even in charge, as in school scenes where Peppermint Patty is constantly at odds with the teacher; but the adults serve as a necessary point of reference. They remind readers and viewers that the children in this strip are from average, all-American homes. The Peanuts gang espouse time-honored concepts like the Golden Rule, honesty

is the best policy, and perseverance. In the American tradition, these are concepts best learned at home.

Garfield is another example of an alternative family. A dog, Odie, a human, John, and a cat, Garfield, form this unusual grouping. Garfield is John's Maggie, harassing him the way Maggie did Jiggs. Odie is man's best friend and a foil for Garfield when John is absent. Playing on the independence and canniness ascribed to cats, action in the strip centers on Garfield's determination to run the household. John makes occasional attempts to regain control, inevitably failing. Odie just sits around with his tail wagging and his tongue hanging out, waiting to be petted.



The underlying affection among this mismatched threesome is usually evident; always evident is their interdependence. They would not be fully themselves without each other. They would also not be a family if they did not

fight with each other while they loved each other. Family à la comic strip, especially in alternative versions, allows for both negative and positive expressions but never threatens the solidarity of the family unit, however unusual the unit.

A third alternative family is presented in Cathy. Cathy is a single woman who is trying her best to be an independent, liberated woman of the 90's. She expends great energy convincing herself and her parents, especially her mother, that she is a perfectly competent human being who can take care of herself. Her pet dog, Electra, constitutes her immediate family; and her boyfriend, currently Irving, extends the metaphor, serving as her sometimes insensitive significant other played against Cathy's insecurities.



The traditional nuclear family is symbolized by her mother, always in a ruffled bib apron and always touting the

glories of homemaking. Cathy's mom is of the opinion that, until Cathy is married and has children of her own, she will not have a home of her own, because home is where the mom is. Nevertheless, Cathy continues to strive for her own way.

How Does It All Add Up?

Social change is always a slippery element to analyze because social institutions change at varying rates, and stated values change more slowly than behaviors (Cavan v). As a result, people have to live with the paradox of values they espouse conflicting with their own behaviors, and this is a particularly difficult task when the institution in question is the family.

Managing paradox is not a new problem; it is simply one that is made obvious on a daily basis because the media make sure everyone knows everything there is to know, almost. We all know where we fall short every time we listen to the news, read a newspaper, or watch a Brady Bunch rerun. Television makes the split between reality and potential even more immediate than the funnies do.

If, indeed, The Medium is the Massage, the "massage" about family is clear. The nuclear family of Mom + Dad + Kids remains the value toward which Americans strive. McLuhan saw the electronic media's ability to spread information as a force that would allow the entire world to shape future generations (14). Mom and Dad were thought to be

outclassed in a media-intensive age. That was twenty-five years ago. Whatever else may have come true of this future vision, the world has not yet displaced parents as the primary socializing influence in their children's lives. The family nest, whether safe harbor or horror chamber, still sets the tone for each succeeding generation.

In terms of the funnies, the nuclear family is at an all time popularity high. Not only are traditional nuclear families like the Bumsteads and the Flagstons successfully adapting to the 90's, but alternative families are creating their own versions of the safe haven. Non-traditional families like the one in Baby Blues are re-learning the lessons of cooperation and group goals in an age of individualism. Funny kids in the funnies still come from supposedly average, all-American homes. And modern traditional families like the Pattersons have successfully adapted the old norms to a new social order. They are the key to understanding the dichotomy between social science and popular media interpretations of family.

The Pattersons represent a perfectionist view of family, the same view that makes correct family so difficult to attain in the 90's. There are increasing demands being placed upon family, and it is probably overburdened insofar as it is expected to provide everything every family member might ever need (Stannard 85). But working out a system that works for the group in question, rather than a system

entirely prescribed by tradition, has made the Patterson household work for its members. Such an approach is more useful by far than the demands of social scientists that the social order change to accommodate a nineteenth century version of family as we enter the twenty-first century or that we scrap old belief sets because they don't fit the current reality.

Rather than bemoaning the breakup of so many nuclear families, an attitude that places the blame for failed children on the people who are trying hardest to raise them, i.e. single parents, a more helpful approach might be to accept that not every nuclear family is a roaring success. Better would be to concentrate instead on means to assist alternate versions of the family more suited to the rigors of modern life. The difference between the Patterson family unit and Garfield and company is not in the ideology of family they portray but in the way they portray it. The values associated with the nuclear family haven't changed in ninety years in spite of cataclysmic social changes. Maybe what the funnies have to tell us is that some values are worth holding onto. After all, "That the media show us what is culturally and personally important is attested by the frequent use to which many scholars. . .put them in substantiating findings from other disciplines" (Wahlstrom 197).

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